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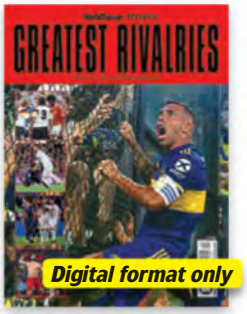

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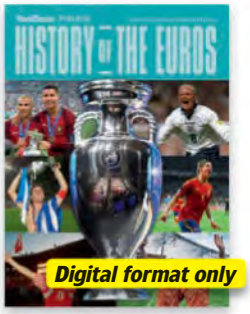

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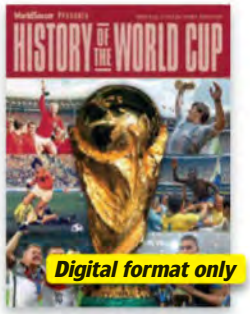

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If there is a theme to this issue, it is highlighting individuals that have ventured abroad to take on new challenges, starting with the late, great Denis Law and his time in Turin. Thiago Almada, Tom Vernon, Ahmet Schaefer, Charlie Trout, Ndubuisi Egbo and Calum Hall have all stepped into the unknown to pursue their own footballing adventures, and we've told their stories too.

With a landmark MLS season about to begin, the knockout rounds of the major European club competitions on the horizon, and the January transfer window wrapped up and analysed, there is plenty more to reflect on and look ahead to.

Jamie Evans, Managing Editor

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Venezuela...Manchester City new boy Claudio Echeverri celebrates scoring in Argentina's stunning 6-0 win over Brazil at the Under-20 South American Championship

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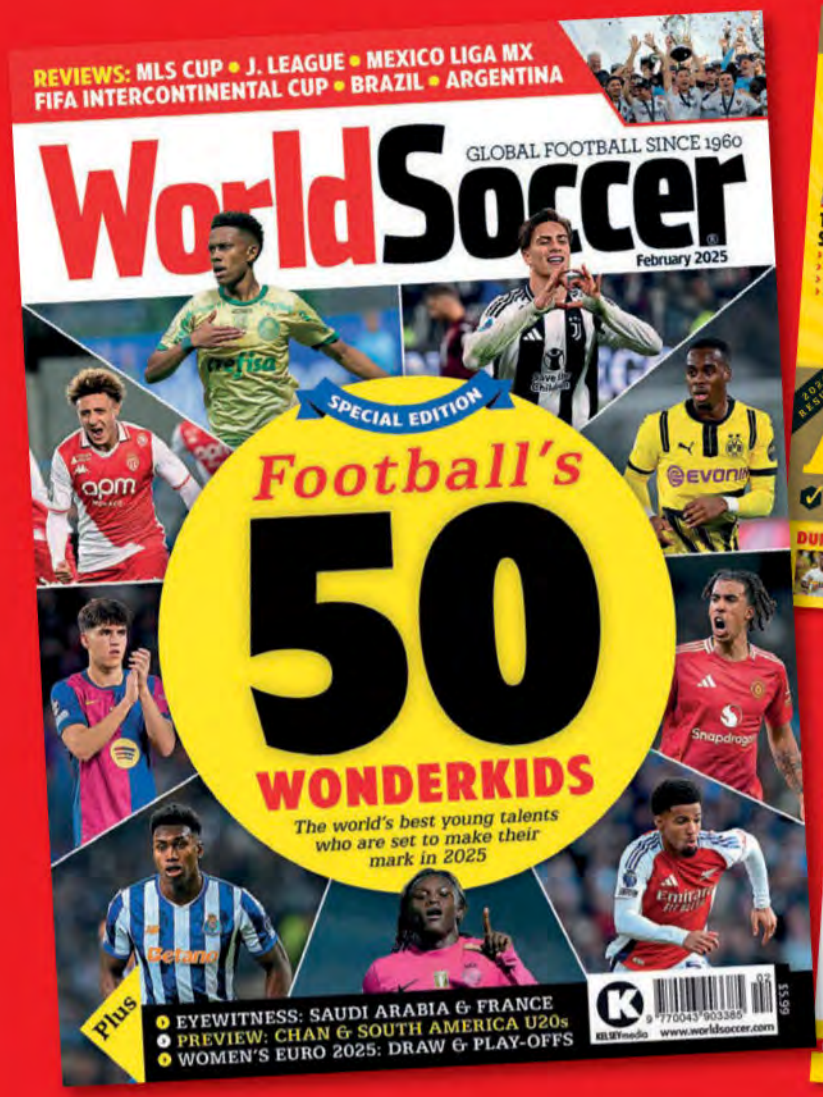

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Henry WINTER

THE VOICE OF FOOTBALL

Going global

Jurgen Klopp and Arsene Wenger's current roles are a waste of their expertise

Former rivals... Jurgen Klopp and Arsene Wenger during a Premier League meeting back in 2016

Jurgen Klopp and Arsene Wenger gave so much of themselves to English football that nobody can begrudge them whatever they decided to do next. Both have taken lucrative jobs with "global" in the title. Both possess knowledge and wisdom missed by English football. Put either Klopp or Wenger on the Football Association board and English football would be in a better place. Imagine all that experience feeding back into the game.

Management is a draining occupation, well paid but exhausting, and it is understandable that those leaving such intense jobs need a break or a lighter workload. Even Klopp, a far more extrovert individual than Wenger, has created a figurative decompression chamber that works for him in life after Liverpool.

Talk to Kopites about Klopp and they don't care what their former manager does for work, even if "Head of Global Soccer for Red Bull GmbH" seems very commercial and not really in keeping with a working-class hero at Liverpool and Borussia Dortmund. "As long as he's happy," they say. They see the posts of Klopp perched in front of a Red Bull helicopter with a can of Red Bull close by going through questions on his DMs. "As long as he's happy," they reply.

They see him in branded kit manufacturers' tops, three lines on a shirt. They see him also appearing in a commercial for a hotel comparison website. Klopp looks well and acts very well. Very natural. Next stop, Hollywood? They don't care what the advertisement is for. As long as he's happy. They love looking at Klopp's social media posts of him walking along in the sunshine heading to another padel lesson. Great. He's happy. That's all that matters. Enjoy your life, Jurgen, hope you win your padel. It's why he will never walk alone. Even now, long after he hears the Liverpool anthem each week, the sentiment remains.

Liverpool fans keep wishing Klopp endless happiness because he brought them such happiness from 2015 to 2024. He left them with so many memories: Mohamed Salah unstoppable in Liverpool 7-0 Manchester United, 2023; Divock

Origi's inspired piece of poaching to climax Liverpool 4-0 Barcelona, 2019; Klopp's "mentality monsters" overcoming Chelsea on penalties in the 2022 FA Cup final; romping to the Premier League title with seven games to spare in 2019-20; and, unforgettably, winning the 2019 Champions League final in Madrid.

So Liverpool supporters relish seeing Klopp enjoying himself. They know how emotional his exit was for him, and still is. All clubs mean everything to their supporters. Being Liverpool manager is more than a job in a dugout. To thrive at Anfield, a manager has to commit himself emotionally as well as professionally. And Klopp did. Standing in front of the Kop, punching the air three times, triggering a guttural roar back, leader and followers in total harmony. Parting inevitably involves an element of mourning.

Klopp can do what he wants, even if it means fronting a huge commercial operation while doubtless offering good footballing advice. He looks well and happy, especially as Liverpool are doing so well. Klopp can go about his padel shots and advertising shoots with pride and a smile. Liverpool's advancement this season shows the myriad abilities of Arne Slot, organising the defence more, making the midfield more solid, and bringing the best out of Ryan Gravenberch and Cody Gakpo. It also shows the quality Slot inherited from Klopp, a point the Dutchman regularly acknowledges.

Klopp is nine months into his post-Liverpool stage. It is seven years since Wenger departed from Arsenal. He left with everyone's gratitude for the trophies and the "Invincibles" but even his most ardent supporters accepted it was time for Wenger to go. Arsenal had been drifting for three to four years, and fans were growing restless, almost mutinous. A once special relationship was at risk of souring. It took time for the Wenger statue to be erected outside the Emirates. It took him a while to return.

Talk to Arsenal fans about Wenger and they know he's doing something for FIFA where he enjoys the grand title of "Chief of Global Football Development". But they were far more interested in seeing Wenger reunited with Ian Wright, Dennis Bergkamp and Thierry Henry at a recent event in London.

Head of global soccer...Klopp is unveiled by Red Bull

Wenger's footballing authenticity helps bring credibility to FIFA. The governing body of world football struggles with public perception, certainly in Europe, because of its president Gianni Infantino's self-promotion and occasional weakness of cosying up to questionable characters.

Wenger works diligently and his latest duty is heading a taskforce on player welfare. That should really be a short meeting: simply look at the FIFA Club World Cup being pushed by Infantino and acknowledge it risks exhausting elite players further at the end of a long season. It may even compromise quality at the 2026 World Cup.

> Wenger was rightly robust in his views on over-playing while Arsenal manager. He now represents an organisation already the subject of legal action from FIFPro, the global players' union, over the congested football calendar

Chief of global football development... Wenger speaking at FIFA Congress last year

Wenger was rightly robust in his views on over-playing while Arsenal manager. He now represents an organisation already the subject of legal action from FIFPro, the global players' union, over the congested football calendar and impact on player workload. He should be a strict timekeeper on the number of games the stars play.

Part of Wenger's FIFA brief is undeniably constructive. Wenger, 75, has seen analysis that half the gifted boys and girls around the world have their footballing dreams stymied by lack of coaching and opportunity. Wenger's plan is for talent ID, finding the best youngsters, and putting them in specially-built centres of excellence in each of FIFA's 211 affiliated member nations by 2027.

It's exactly what the governing body of world football should be doing. It's partly political, as ever with FIFA, ensuring the national associations are grateful, but if Wenger's initiative deepens a country's pool of playing and coaching talent it should be applauded.

Wenger, like Klopp, has so much experience and still so much to give. Both have gone global now. It's just a pity that English football is not tapping into that expertise.

• **Ask Henry:** Submit your questions to Henry Winter by subscribing to our weekly newsletter at *worldsoccer.com*

Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

Denis Law's Italian job

The Scottish legend's year at Torino offers a stark reminder of how much football has evolved

Italian adventure ...Denis Law with then-Torino team-mate Joe Baker *Credit: Alamy*

Memories of Denis Law served up a plethora of happy tales, but in the background was a significant reminder of how the footballing stage has been revolutionised since he was in his inspirational, goalscoring pomp.

Trophies and goals, such as the 300-plus he claimed on behalf of Huddersfield Town, Manchester City, Torino, Manchester United and Scotland remain the ultimate targets. Yet the three record transfer fees that acknowledged his talent would be small in comparison to the exorbitant prices of today: £55,000 from Huddersfield to City, £110,000 from City to Torino and then £115,000 back to United.

No substitutes when Law undertook all three big-money moves; no live league football on television; no international free movement of players; no European mini-leagues; no named shirts; no goal-line technology; no VAR; not even a fourth official let alone a studio-full of assistants of all shapes, sizes and job descriptions.

> "Italian football, with its hoodlums, gangsters and little dictators, was just a sick farce"
>
> Denis Law, writing in an early autobiography

Sounds prehistoric? It was pre-history, in a way: 30 years before satellite broadcasting and the Premier League and almost 35 years before Bosman. In (almost) the words of L. P. Hartley in opening *The Go-Between*: "The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there."

Foreign country, indeed. Back then Italy and not England was the *Eldorado* towards which ambitious

players dreamed of travelling. The attraction was not style or standard. No secret about the viciously ruthless defensive tactics that accentuated the financial clout of the courageous *stranieri* who slotted into each club's two-foreigner permit.

Wages were the price of skin accepted by John Charles, Omar Sivori, Jose Altafini, Antonio Valentin Angelillo and others for the bloody battering that their goalscoring talents attracted. At a time when English football was just breaking out of the maximum-wage era, money was the overwhelming lure for British pioneering goalscorers in the early 1960s such as Law, Joe Baker, Jimmy Greaves and Gerry Hitchens.

In the late spring of 1961, when Law was first approached by Internazionale, he calculated the offer – including basic wage, bonuses and signing-on instalment – at £200-a-week, which was twice the then-sensational £100-a-week which Johnny Haynes was about to be paid by Fulham. City offered Law £80-a-week to stay but this was still hardly competitive.

Of course, as all the wide-eyed innocent imports would discover, there was a price to be paid. Italian clubs pioneered the *ritiro* system, taking their players away to long training camps pre-season and for two or three days before a match, even sometimes a home match. The boredom was intense for lively young men who had believed they would find the world – or, Italy at least – at their well-heeled feet. No mobile phones or internet back then. They were held effectively incommunicado.

The new boys also found the clubs devising all manner of means to claim back some of their wages through fines for a host of pedantic disciplinary infractions, whether time-keeping or dress code. Above all, Law and Co. discovered how much results mattered. As he once recalled: "If we won and I fancied haggis for supper the club would gladly have flown it in from Scotland. But if we lost..."

The cost of defeat in Italy in the 1950s and 1960s was not only reputational but seriously financial. Hence the stop-at-nothing "tactics" employed by opponents in the day before TV cameras were tracking action on and off the ball, out of sight of the referee. Provocation paid dividends as when a defender stuck his fingers in Baker's eyes and the England striker kicked back. He was the one duly sent off and heavily fined by Torino.

Law was not impressed, recalling in an early biography: "Italian football, with its hoodlums, gangsters and little dictators, was just a sick farce."

The idyll began to turn sour for the pair after a car crash in early 1962 when Baker navigated the wrong way at a roundabout in his sparkling new Alfa Romeo. Baker was the more battered; Law escaped with a few cuts and bruises. Effectively it was the beginning of the end. Just as Bill Nicholson had "rescued" Jimmy Greaves from Milan for Tottenham in December 1961, so Matt Busby reclaimed Law from Torino for United in 1962; one week later Baker came "home" to Arsenal.

Culture, lifestyle and language were much more problematic challenges for players going abroad then compared with today when even modest players from lower divisions flit between one jurisdiction and another.

Also, in the 1960s and even later, no automatic right existed for a player to abandon his club for a week to turn out for his country. No unified match calendar or international breaks back then. Thus, most national managers conceded defeat and ignored any of their players who had dared vanish into well-paid exile in Italy or Spain.

Not that Denis Law could ever be forgotten, as a generous family man, a member of United's "Holy Trinity" or arguably Scotland's greatest footballer.

Proof, if it were needed, was in a tale he enjoyed telling against himself once. This was back in Turin almost 20 years later, on *BBC* duty at the European finals in 1980: "I asked my taxi driver if he remembered John Charles. He said: 'Ah, John Charles? *Magnifico*, a gentleman.' Then I asked if he remembered Joe Baker and he said: 'Joe Baker? Brave centre-forward.' So then I asked him: Do you remember Denis Law?' He said: 'Denis Law? Kick, kick, kick!"

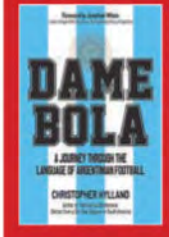
Obituary on page 18

Italian job...Law struck ten goals in 27 Serie A games for Torino in 1961-62 *Credit: Torino FC*

BOOKS THIS MONTH

CLASSIC DERBIES AND EPIC RIVALRIES
By Andy Bollen
(Pitch Publishing)

Classic Derbies and Epic Rivalries explores the history, tradition and violent nature of football's biggest clashes. It includes Spain's famous *El Clasico*, Buenos Aires' *Superclasico*, Turkey's Intercontinental derby and many more. The heated rivalry that fuels these contests is often sinister yet remains an essential part of the event. It can be a deep-rooted animosity, based on geography, politics or religion.



DAME BOLA
By Christopher Hylland
(Pitch Publishing)

Dame Bola takes you on a wonderful journey across a country with an incredibly rich footballing tongue. Expect to discover poetically romantic words, phrases, concepts and metaphors and the many curious stories that define them. Enjoy a deep dive into the cultural, historical and linguistic context of football terminology exclusive to a society that cannot live – nor speak – without its beloved *futbol*.

Jonathan WILSON

TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

More games, more teams – but no more quality

Have UEFA's reforms to the Champions League improved the competition?

The problem with assessing anything new is that when you first see it, you are viewing it through the eyes of the old. It's certainly true that the new Champions League format appeared for a long time more exciting than the old group stage – although given how stale and predictable that had become almost anything would have done. But will it still seem exciting in three or four years' time?

There were moments of intrigue – Liverpool beating Real Madrid; Aston Villa beating Bayern Munich; Brest and Atalanta winning four games; Madrid losing three; and, perhaps most fascinating of all, Manchester City losing to Sporting, Juventus and Paris Saint-Germain while also throwing away a three-goal lead to draw at home to Feyenoord. And it is true that the number of dead-rubber games has been reduced: only two of the 18 games on the madcap final Wednesday had nothing riding on them.

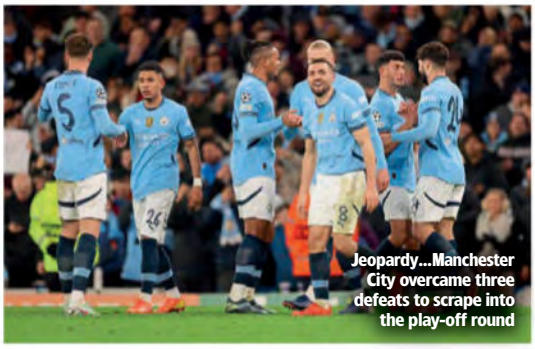
Defenders of the new format would also point out how beneficial it has been for the likes of Celtic, Club Brugge, Shakhtar Donetsk and Dinamo Zagreb – the big teams from the second rung of leagues. They have become used to being Champions League also-rans but have been given a sense of involvement by the new model, even if only two of those four in the end secured a play-off slot. But while more matches between teams of similar ability is generally a positive, their continued interest has been largely to do with the fact that 24 teams rather than 16 progress. If you increase the number of teams going through by 50 per cent, of course more are going to feel involved; is increasing the number of games from 96 to 144 really worth that?

First place...in-form Liverpool finished top of the Champions League's new league phase table

Are any of those sides any nearer to actually winning the trophy? Of course not. Which hints at the fundamental problem: you can tweak formats all you like, but none of that is going to address the overwhelming financial disparities in the European game. And if there was any doubt around that, look at the top eight, the sides getting the byes into the last 16: all of them come from Europe's top five leagues. As for the top 24, only one team, Celtic, came from outside the top eight leagues. At the same time, nine sides – a collection of teams from Europe's smaller leagues, over-performers stripped of their best players and RB Leipzig – were mathematically eliminated before the final round of games.

> You can tweak formats all you like, but none of that is going to address the overwhelming financial disparities in the European game

That there was a sense of jeopardy around Manchester City and PSG and, more briefly, Madrid, was less because of the format than because of their individual failings. In fact, the format arguably helped them: City progressed despite winning only three of eight games. In that sense, far from creating jeopardy, the new format has proved far too forgiving. That said, a play-off tie against holders Madrid means there is at least some consequence for failure to make the top eight. The great reward for those eight is to play



Jeopardy...Manchester City overcame three defeats to scrape into the play-off round

two fewer games, as sure a sign as there could be that the calendar is overstuffed, in part by the new format.

Yes, there were fixtures between elite sides – more than in the old group stage. But it turned out that, apart from seeding or being allowed to take two weeks off, none of those games meant much. Some results felt significant because we had not yet grasped that a team can lose three or even four games in the league phase and still progress. In future years, as the format becomes more familiar, will such games even create a ripple?

Increasingly, there is a sense of football as a content-production machine. Games, more games, endless games, stuff to stick on, big names, colour, glossy production...and very little sense of anything meaning very much. Is that really desirable? One of the oddities of administrators across all sports – this is not just a football issue – is how little they seem to trust the sport element of their product to interest and attract viewers. Do people want to watch endless games between big teams with big names even if they mean very little? Perhaps they do, but the early signs from the new format would suggest not, with *TNT Sports* reporting that UK viewing figures are down.

Part of the issue, perhaps, is a sense of decontextualisation: nobody can possibly retain the fixtures in their heads, or have more than a rough sense of the table, and so knowing what any given game means often requires research. In that sense, the very closeness that led to so few dead rubbers is a problem: 17 teams separated by three points going into the final game is a big mushy middle. In the end, the final matchday of 18 games happening simultaneously was almost too chaotic to follow, a flawed TV event of goals flying in and tables updating that essentially made it impossible to watch any actual football.

But then, actual football has long since ceased to matter to those who run it.

Anderson TALISCA

(Fenerbahce)

The January window saw the latest chapter of a curious football career begin, with Talisca joining Fenerbahce from Al Nassr. The 31-year-old Brazilian might be the most talented player not to have played in one of Europe's top five leagues over the past decade, and certainly one of the most well paid. Since leaving Bahia in his home country back in 2014, he has played for Benfica, Besiktas and Guangzhou, before lining up alongside Cristiano Ronaldo in Saudi Arabia.

Cynics might look at that career and suggest that Talisca has been playing on easy mode, but his new manager Jose Mourinho does not indulge slackers. The results will be fascinating.

YANG Min-hyeok
(Queens Park Rangers)
The breakout star of last season's K-League, earning a move to Tottenham, the 18-year-old winger will spend the rest of the season in the Championship after joining QPR on loan.

Nestory IRANKUNDA
(Grasshoppers)
The great hope of Australian football, signed by Bayern Munich from Adelaide United last summer, the 19-year-old Irankunda is set for his first taste of top-flight European football on loan at Swiss side Grasshoppers.

Bajung DARBOE
(Bayern Munich)
In 2023, Bayern signed a "talent pathway" agreement with LAFC in order to develop players. Darboe is the first player to benefit from this partnership, joining the German giants' academy from Los Angeles.

Michael KAYODE
(Brentford)
One of *World Soccer's* 50 wonderkids to watch in 2025, the 20-year-old Italian right-back was signed by Brentford from Fiorentina on loan until the end of the season.

Hayden MATTHEWS
(Portsmouth)
Another of the young stars that we picked out in our talent scout special last month – shortly after making his Australia debut – the 20-year-old centre-back joined Portsmouth from Sydney FC for £1.26m.

"He was the best Scottish player of all time…you had guys like George Best, Bobby Charlton – the greatest English player of all time and a fantastic player for our club – and they called Denis 'the King'"

Sir Alex Ferguson pays tribute to the late Denis Law

OBITUARIES

Holy Trinity…tributes laid at the statue of Denis Law, George Best and Bobby Charlton at Old Trafford

Denis LAW (1940-2025)
Denis Law, King of the Stretford End, also ranks as perhaps Scotland's greatest footballer with a record-equalling 30 goals in 55 appearances (47 fewer than his rival for the top spot, Kenny Dalglish), as the only Scot to have been hailed as European Footballer of the Year. Law claimed the Ballon d'Or in 1964.

Born in Aberdeen, he began his career under the tutelage of Bill Shankly at Huddersfield Town, spent a year with Manchester City before undertaking a turbulent year in Italy with Torino then returning to Manchester with United.

Law ranks third among United's all-time marksmen with 237 goals in 404 appearances over 11 years. In his twilight years, he returned to neighbours City – though the tale that he scored the goal for them which condemned United to relegation was not strictly accurate. Law was a member of the United squad that became the first from England to win the European Cup in 1968, but missed the 4-1 victory over Benfica in the Wembley final with a knee injury. He also won one FA Cup and two English league titles with United, as well as helping Scotland win the British Home Championship six times.

Later Law became a television pundit, patron of UK-based charity Football Aid and was appointed CBE in 2016 for services to football and charity.

Cover star…Denis Law smiling on the front cover of World Soccer's September 1973 issue

Manchester City hero…Tony Book lifts the 1969 FA Cup

Nicolae OAIDA (1933-2025)
Oaida, a lawyer as well as international footballer then coach, spent most of his career with Progresul for whom he scored 79 goals in 236 league games. The striker won only the Romanian Cup, and scored once in six games for his country, Romania. His coaching career included two years in Libya with both the national team and Al Ahly Benghazi.

Vicente VEGA (1955-2025)
Goalkeeper who played for Venezuela in three Copa America tournaments between 1975 and 1983 among his 15 caps. A double national champion with Portuguesa. Both his son and grandson were professional goalkeepers.

Yilmaz URUL (1942-2025)
Former Istanbulspor, Fenerbahce and Mersin goalkeeper who played four times for Turkey in the mid-1960s.

Tony BOOK (1934-2025)
Solid right-back who did not emerge from non-league football until he was 29, under Malcolm Allison at Plymouth Argyle in 1964. Two years later Allison took him to Manchester City and named him captain. Book led City to success in the league, FA Cup, League Cup and European Cup Winners' Cup. He was a League Cup winner with City again in 1976, this time as manager.

Jorge CACERES (1948-2025)
Argentine-born forward with six caps for Colombia after joining America de Cali in 1973. Played briefly with Atletico Bucaramanga and Deportivo Pereira, with whom he was a 35-goal league top scorer. In 1976, Caceres returned to America for a further five seasons.

Bobby KENNEDY (1937-2025)
The Scottish defender made over 200 appearances for Manchester City after four years at Kilmarnock where he reached two domestic cup finals. He helped City return to the top flight in 1965-66 before later going on to play and manage Grimsby Town.

Mohsen HABACHA (1942-2025)
Tunisia defender whose career peaked in 1963 with appearances in the Africa Cup of Nations, Mediterranean Games and Arab Cup. Spent all of his 14-year club career with Sousse-based outfit ES Sahel apart from a year in French football with the Corsican club Ajaccio.

Fabio CUDICINI (1935-2025)
Outstandingly tall and brave goalkeeper who was a Serie A fixture in the 1960s with Roma, Brescia briefly, then, to his own surprise, Milan. Cudicini, born in Trieste, won the 1961 Inter-Cities Fairs Cup and 1964 Italian Cup with Roma, and was Combi award winner as the best goalkeeper in Serie A in 1962.

He was preparing to wind down his career in 1967 when, at 32, Milan came calling. In the next five years, he won the league title, Intercontinental Cup, European Cup and Cup Winners' Cup. He retired after adding the Italian Cup to his honours list in 1972.

Perhaps the finest Italian goalkeeper to never play for the *Azzurri*, his son Carlo (formerly of Chelsea and Tottenham) was also a trophy-winning goalkeeper.

Iconic keeper…Milan pay respect to Fabio Cudicini

"One of the best defenders the club has ever signed – an exceptional player and terrific reader of the game. I was close friends with George Best, and he always said Tony was his most difficult opponent"

Manchester City legend Mike Summerbee on his former club team-mate and captain Tony Book

Gilbert VAN BINST (1951-2025)
Attacking right-back who played 15 times for Belgium and was a member of the squad that finished third as hosts at Euro 1972. With Anderlecht, Van Binst won two league titles, four Belgian Cups, two League Cups and the European Cup Winners' Cup in 1976 and 1978. On the latter occasion, he netted twice in the final defeat of Austria Vienna. Later had short spells with Toulouse and Club Brugge.

Aldo AGROPPI (1944-2025)
Twice an Italian Cup winner with Torino, midfielder Agroppi played five times for Italy between 1972 and 1973. Undertook a 13-year coaching career, twice with Fiorentina where he once had to be rescued by Daniel Passarella from attack by a crowd of angry fans.

Mimi EL-SHERBINI (1937-2025)
Defender who was an AFCON winner with Egypt in 1959. Also appeared at the Olympic Games football finals in 1960 and 1964. El-Sherbini spent 14 years with Al Ahly before turning to coaching, including a short spell in charge of the United Arab Emirates national team in 1975. Subsequently one of Egypt's leading football commentators.

Werner LEIMGRUBER (1934-2025)
Leimgruber was one of the most reliable of Swiss defenders with FC Zurich in the 1960s, winning the league three times, the domestic cup twice and reaching the European Cup semi-finals. Originally a striker, he moved back into midfield and then defence, scoring 91 goals in 395 competitive matches for the club. He also won ten caps for Switzerland, notably playing at the 1966 World Cup.

Harry BILD (1936-2025)
Sweden inside-forward with Norrkoping, FC Zurich, Feyenoord – scoring 39 goals in 52 league matches – and hometown club Osters. Bild was a regular member of the national team between 1957 and 1968, notching 13 goals in 28 games. However, the recall of Italy-based exiles meant he was overlooked for the hosts' World Cup squad in 1958. Was voted the Swedish Footballer of the Year in 1963.

Dusan MARAVIC (1939-2025)
Maravic, an Olympic champion with Yugoslavia in Rome in 1960, was born in France where his father was working on the outbreak of war. They returned home in 1946 to Yugoslavia where he played for Spartak Subotica and Red Star Belgrade while scoring three goals in seven games for the national team in 1960. The Olympic win meant that, in 1964, Maravic was given special dispensation to return to France with Racing Club Paris. He spent two years there before ending his career with Deportivo Italia in Venezuela.

Abdul Salam Amer AL MUKHAINI (1988-2025)
Star defender for Oman who died suddenly at 36, one week after helping Dhofar win the local Super Cup. Scored one goal in 70 appearances for Oman after making his debut in 2009.

Andreas STAMATIADIS (1935-2025)
Versatile forward who was captain for a record nine years of his only senior club, AEK Athens. He scored 78 goals in 316 league games, winning the title twice, the Greek Cup on three occasions and being crowned league top scorer in 1956-57. Stamatiadis played eight times for Greece between 1954 and 1963. He later won the league title again with AEK as coach in 1979, and guided Greece to the runners-up spot at the 1998 Under-21 European Championship.

Nelson SILVA PACHECO (1944-2025)
Another of Colombia's "adopted" stars, Silva Pacheco was born in Uruguay, starting out with Danubio and Liverpool and moving to Argentina with Sportivo Italia, Tigre and Rosario Central before settling in Colombia. Scored 164 goals in ten years for Atletico Nacional, Deportes Quindio, Cucuta Deportivo and Junior and was 36-goal league top scorer in 1973. Two years later he helped Colombia finish as Copa America runners-up.

Juan Manuel VILLA (1938-2025)
Villa was a Real Madrid graduate unlucky enough to turn professional in the early 1960s when opportunities for even the brightest young forwards were minimal. Madrid's loss was Real Zaragoza's gain. Villa was a key component of the *Cinco Magnificos* attack – alongside Canario, Eleuterio Santos, Marcelino and Carlos Lapetra – who twice won the Spanish Cup and the 1963-64 Fairs Cup.

Red Devils youngster... David Gaskell in 1962

Aberdeen days... Jimmy Calderwood

David GASKELL (1940-2025)
The goalkeeper holds the honour as Manchester United's youngest player, making his debut versus Manchester City in 1956 aged just 16 years and 19 days. He won two league titles and the FA Cup with the club, before finishing his career with spells at Wigan and Wrexham.

Martinus Johannes Maria RUYS (1967-2025)
"Tiny" Ruys played more than 200 times for Fortuna Sittard before turning to coaching. Briefly manager of the UAE in 2001 and then top club Al Ain.

Jimmy CALDERWOOD (1955-2025)
Scottish-born midfielder who broke through with Birmingham City before building a career in the Netherlands with Willem II, Roda JC and Heracles. Stayed on as coach with Willem II and NEC before returning home to Scotland with Dunfermline and Aberdeen.

Cristobal ORTEGA (1956-2025)
Midfielder Ortega is one of the all-time legends of Mexican giants America for whom he starred from 1974 until 1992, playing a club record 711 matches. He won 14 club trophies including six league titles and three CONCACAF Champions Cups. Scored four goals in 24 games for Mexico including appearances at both the 1978 and 1986 World Cups.

Garry BROOKE (1960-2025)
Midfielder Brooke was an FA Cup winner with Tottenham in 1981 and 1982, and also featured in the early rounds of their UEFA Cup success in 1983-84 before going on to play for Norwich, Groningen, Wimbledon, Stoke and Brentford.

Words by Keir Radnedge

Spurs tribute...the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium remembers Garry Brooke

"I have enjoyed the chance to work in a new country with a different culture...football is unpredictable and sometimes things don't go the way we want"

Steven Gerrard announces his departure as head coach of Saudi club Al Ettifaq

UEFA knockout round draws

The fixtures, schedule and road to the final for Europe's three elite club competitions

Champions League

PLAY-OFFS
FIRST LEGS: February 11-12
SECOND LEGS: February 18-19
Brest v Paris Saint-Germain
Club Brugge v Atalanta
Manchester City v Real Madrid
Juventus v PSV
Feyenoord v Milan
Celtic v Bayern Munich
Sporting v Borussia Dortmund
Monaco v Benfica

ROUND OF 16
DRAW: February 21
FIRST LEGS: March 4-5
SECOND LEGS: March 11-12
1. Brest/Paris Saint-Germain v Liverpool or Barcelona
2. Club Brugge/Atalanta v Lille or Aston Villa
3. Manchester City/Real Madrid v Atletico Madrid or Bayer Leverkusen
4. Juventus/PSV v Arsenal or Internazionale
5. Feyenoord/Milan v Internazionale or Arsenal
6. Celtic/Bayern Munich v Bayer Leverkusen or Atletico Madrid
7. Sporting/Borussia Dortmund v Aston Villa or Lille
8. Monaco/Benfica v Barcelona or Liverpool

QUARTER-FINALS
FIRST LEGS: April 8-9
SECOND LEGS: April 15-16
1. Winner Ro16 1 v Winner Ro16 2
2. Winner Ro16 3 v Winner Ro16 4
3. Winner Ro16 5 v Winner Ro16 6
4. Winner Ro16 7 v Winner Ro16 8

SEMI-FINALS
FIRST LEGS: April 29-30
SECOND LEGS: May 6-7
Winner QF1 v Winner QF2
Winner QF3 v Winner QF4

FINAL
MAY 31
Allianz Arena, Munich

Europa League

PLAY-OFFS
FIRST LEGS: February 13
SECOND LEGS: February 20
Ferencvaros v Viktoria Plzen
Twente v Bodo/Glimt
Union Saint-Gilloise v Ajax
AZ v Galatasaray
Midtjylland v Real Sociedad
PAOK v FCSB
Fenerbahce v Anderlecht
Porto v Roma

ROUND OF 16
DRAW: February 21
FIRST LEGS: March 6
SECOND LEGS: March 13
1. Ferencvaros/Viktoria Plzen v Lazio or Athletic Club
2. Twente/Bodo/Glimt v Olympiacos or Rangers
3. Union Saint-Gilloise/Ajax v Eintracht Frankfurt or Lyon
4. AZ/Galatasaray v Manchester United or Tottenham Hotspur
5. Midtjylland/Real Sociedad v Tottenham Hotspur or Manchester United
6. PAOK/FCSB v Lyon or Eintracht Frankfurt
7. Fenerbahce/Anderlecht v Rangers or Olympiacos
8. Porto/Roma v Athletic Club or Lazio

QUARTER-FINALS
FIRST LEGS: April 10
SECOND LEGS: April 17
1. Winner Ro16 1 v Winner Ro16 2
2. Winner Ro16 3 v Winner Ro16 4
3. Winner Ro16 5 v Winner Ro16 6
4. Winner Ro16 7 v Winner Ro16 8

SEMI-FINALS
FIRST LEGS: May 1
SECOND LEGS: May 8
Winner QF1 v Winner QF2
Winner QF3 v Winner QF4

FINAL
MAY 21
San Mames, Bilbao

Conference League

PLAY-OFFS
FIRST LEGS: February 13
SECOND LEGS: February 20
Gent v Real Betis
TSC v Jagiellonia Bialystok
Celje v APOEL
Vikingur Reykjavik v Panathinaikos
Borac Banja Luka v Olimpija Ljubljana
Omonia v Pafos
Molde v Shamrock Rovers
Copenhagen v Heidenheim

ROUND OF 16
DRAW: February 21
FIRST LEGS: March 6
SECOND LEGS: March 13
1. Gent/Real Betis v Chelsea or Vitoria Guimaraes
2. TSC/Jagiellonia Bialystok v Legia Warsaw or Cercle Brugge
3. Celje/APOEL v Djurgardens or Lugano
4. Vikingur Reykjavik/Panathinaikos v Fiorentina or Rapid Vienna
5. Borac Banja Luka/Olimpija Ljubljana v Rapid Vienna or Fiorentina
6. Omonia/Pafos v Lugano or Djurgardens
7. Molde/Shamrock Rovers v Cercle Brugge or Legia Warsaw
8. Copenhagen/Heidenheim v Vitoria Guimaraes or Chelsea

QUARTER-FINALS
FIRST LEGS: April 10
SECOND LEGS: April 17
1. Winner Ro16 1 v Winner Ro16 2
2. Winner Ro16 3 v Winner Ro16 4
3. Winner Ro16 5 v Winner Ro16 6
4. Winner Ro16 7 v Winner Ro16 8

SEMI-FINALS
FIRST LEGS: May 1
SECOND LEGS: May 8
Winner QF1 v Winner QF2
Winner QF3 v Winner QF4

FINAL
MAY 28
Wroclaw Stadium, Wroclaw

"We are the worst team, maybe, in the history of Manchester United. We have to acknowledge that and change that"

Manchester United manager Ruben Amorim owns up to the scale of his job at Old Trafford

The month in numbers

The facts and stats that have caught our eye in the world of football this month...

4,266

Days between David Moyes' last game in charge of Everton back in 2013 and his return to Goodison Park in January after he replaced Sean Dyche as Toffees manager.

$1.1m

Transfer fee paid by Chelsea Women to San Diego Wave for USA defender Naomi Girma, making her the most expensive women's footballer of all time.

2

African nations to appoint new managers in January, with Nigeria hiring former Mali coach Eric Chelle, and ex-Cameroon boss Rigobert Song taking charge of the Central African Republic.

4

England internationals in the current Milan squad after Kyle Walker joined Tammy Abraham, Ruben Loftus-Cheek and Fikayo Tomori at the San Siro.

Another trophy... Angel Di Maria

36

Career trophies won by Argentina legend Angel Di Maria after the winger won the Portuguese League Cup with Benfica.

3

Clubs that Wilfried Zaha has played for in the last year after cutting short his loan at Lyon to join Major League Soccer outfit Charlotte FC from Galatasaray until the end of the season.

Cup upset... Bourgoin-Jallieu

5

Tier of French football that minnows Bourgoin-Jallieu play in, the club that knocked giants Lyon out of the French Cup in January.

2

Nordic countries to appoint a new manager in January, as Finland hired Jacob Friis and Iceland appointed Arnar Gunnlaugsson.

22

Minutes that Ben Godfrey played for Atalanta in Serie A before returning to the Premier League, joining Ipswich Town on loan.

1

Uzbeks to play in the Premier League after Abdukodir Khusanov made his debut for Manchester City. The East Asian country becomes the 126th nation to be represented in the league.

15

Premier League goals scored by Kaoru Mitoma after he netted at Old Trafford, taking him past Shinji Okazaki as the league's all-time top-scoring Japanese player.

1

Players that have transferred directly from LA Galaxy to LAFC, after Mark Delgado became the first player to make the switch in the two clubs' history.

2028

Year that Julian Nagelsmann's Germany contract will expire after the *Nationalmannschaft* coach signed a two-year extension.

19

Clubs in Norway's top two divisions that have voted to stop using VAR in the country's football.

9.5

Years that Erling Haaland will be at Manchester City for after signing a contract extension until 2034.

41

Age that Brazil legend Marta will be when her contract at Orlando Pride expires, having signed a new deal taking her through to the end of the 2026 NWSL season.

22

Games that Julen Lopetegui took charge of West Ham United – the shortest tenure of any permanent manager in the club's Premier League history – before being replaced by Graham Potter.

6

Months that the African Nations Championship was postponed by, with a new date set for August. The delay was announced just 18 days before CHAN was due to begin.

1

Players from Burkina Faso to hit a Premier League treble after Dango Ouattara's impressive hat-trick for Bournemouth v Nottingham Forest.

TRANSFER ROUND-UP*

£59.1m	***Khvicha KVARATSKHELIA***	*(Napoli to Paris Saint-Germain)*
£59.1m	***Omar MARMOUSH***	*(Eintracht Frankfurt to Manchester City)*
£33.8m	***Abdukodir KHUSANOV***	*(Lens to Manchester City)*
£29.6m	***Vitor REIS***	*(Palmeiras to Manchester City)*
£21.9m	***Elye WAHI***	*(Marseille to Eintracht Frankfurt)*
£20m	***Donyell MALEN***	*(Borussia Dortmund to Aston Villa)*
£20m	***Jaden PHILOGENE***	*(Aston Villa to Ipswich Town)*
£19.4m	***Arthur VERMEEREN***	*(Atletico Madrid to RB Leipzig)*
£16.6m	***Emmanuel AGBADOU***	*(Reims to Wolverhampton Wanderers)*
£16.6m	***Seko FOFANA***	*(Al Nassr to Rennes)*
£12.7m	***Andreas SKOV OLSEN***	*(Club Brugge to Wolfsburg)*
£12.6m	***Maxence CAQUERET***	*(Lyon to Como)*
£12.5m	***Claudio ECHEVERRI***	*(River Plate to Manchester City)*
£12.5m	***Antonin KINSKY***	*(Slavia Prague to Tottenham Hotspur)*
£12.5m	***Brice SAMBA***	*(Lens to Rennes)*
£12m	***Romain ESSE***	*(Millwall to Crystal Palace)*
£12m	***Diego GOMEZ***	*(Inter Miami to Brighton)*
£10.9m	***Mika BIERETH***	*(Sturm Graz to Monaco)*
£10.9m	***Alberto COSTA***	*(Vitoria Guimaraes to Juventus)*
£10m	***Kyogo FURUHASHI***	*(Celtic to Rennes)*

**January deals involving Europe's top five leagues only*

"Now was the right time to close this chapter"

Simon Kjaer, the former Denmark captain and centre-back of 132 international caps, announces his retirement from football having failed to find a new club since leaving Milan last summer

12 MOVES *you might have missed...*

TRANSFERS ★ LOANS ★ SACKINGS ★ HIRINGS ★ SWITCHES ★ RETIREMENTS

Nuri SAHIN

Borussia Dortmund parted company with their head coach, seven months after hiring their former midfielder, with the club lying tenth in the Bundesliga.

Ole Gunnar SOLSKJAER

In his first managerial role since leaving Manchester United in 2021, the Norwegian coach took charge of Turkish side **Besiktas**, replacing the sacked Giovanni van Bronckhorst.

Rudi GARCIA

After firing Domenico Tedesco, **Belgium** appointed the ex-Lille, Roma, Marseille and Lyon coach. Garcia's last role was at Napoli, where he was sacked in 2023.

Patrick KLUIVERT

The former Netherlands striker took charge of **Indonesia**, replacing Shin tae-yong. The team is in World Cup contention and has a number of Dutch-born players in the squad.

Naby KEITA

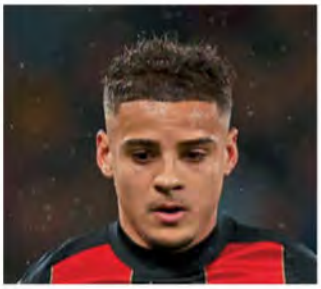
The ex-Liverpool midfielder joined **Ferencvaros** on loan from Werder Bremen for the rest of the season. He will work with the Hungarian side's new manager, Robbie Keane.

Sebastien HALLER

After his loan at Leganes from Dortmund was cut short, Haller re-joined his old club **Utrecht**, also on loan, where he scored 51 goals between 2014 and 2017.

KAIO CESAR

The winger was one of the stars of Vitoria Guimaraes' progress to the Conference League knockout rounds, so they will miss him after he joined Saudi side **Al Hilal**.



Max AARONS

The English right-back joined La Liga strugglers **Valencia** on loan from Bournemouth with a €9m option agreed. He debuted coming off the bench in a 7-1 defeat to Barcelona.

DELE Alli

Having been released by Everton, the ex-England midfielder joined Serie A club **Como**. Cesc Febregas, who Dele came up against in the Premier League, will be his coach.

Ander HERRERA

"I'm happy to realise a dream," said the 35-year-old former Manchester United midfielder after joining **Boca Juniors** on a free transfer from Athletic Club.

Keylor NAVAS

After being released by Paris Saint-Germain last summer, the 38-year-old Costa Rican goalkeeper finally found a new club, joining Argentine side **Newell's Old Boys**.

JAMES Rodriguez

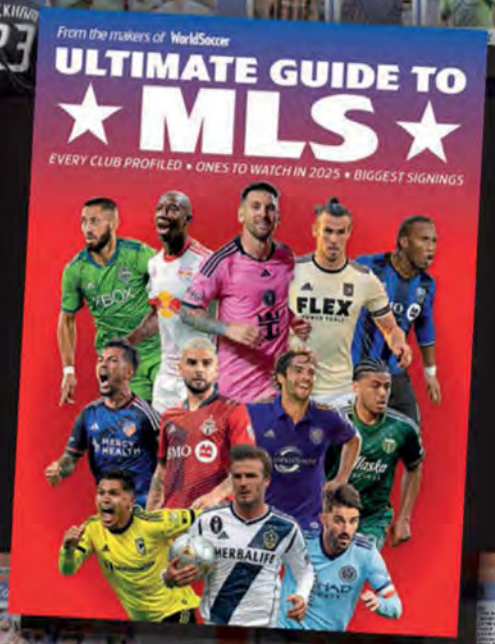
The Colombian icon joined the 12th club of his career, in the 11th different country, by signing for Mexican side **Leon** after being released by Rayo Vallecano.

From the makers of **WorldSoccer**

ULTIMATE GUIDE TO ★ MLS ★

100-PAGE BOOKAZINE

As MLS embarks on its landmark 30th season, we look back on the history of the league, the stories and fans behind every club, the rivalries that define them, and the players that made MLS what it is today



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6 of the best January signings

Jamie Evans examines some of the standout deals from the January 2025 transfer window

1 Randal KOLO MUANI

PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN TO JUVENTUS

The Frenchman has often been described as a player with promise, so it might come as a surprise to learn that Kolo Muani recently turned 26. The time to deliver on that promise then, is now, and a loan move to Turin may be just what he needs.

In the summer of 2023, Paris Saint-Germain completed a stunning deal worth up to €90 million to sign the forward from Eintracht Frankfurt, yet he only scored 11 goals in one and a half seasons with the French club. The early signs at Juventus, though, are more promising: 43 minutes into his Serie A debut, he scored with an instinctive finish against league leaders Napoli, having received a glowing endorsement from his new coach Thiago Motta.

2 Khvicha KVARATSKHELIA

NAPOLI TO PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN

With Kolo Muani's departure, PSG had an attacking space to fill in their squad. While the Parisians' "bling-bling" era of signing big-name celebrities may be over, the club's Qatari owners are not afraid to splash the cash when required, paying Napoli €70m for the Georgian.

Arguably the most entertaining player in Europe when inspiring Napoli to their *Scudetto* win in 2022-23, Kvaratskhelia should fit right in with PSG's modern squad of young, promising players. The 23-year-old will compete for selection on the left side of the attack with Bradley Barcola, and staked his claim on debut, grabbing an assist after a trademark darting dribble inside from the wing before teeing up Ousmane Dembele.

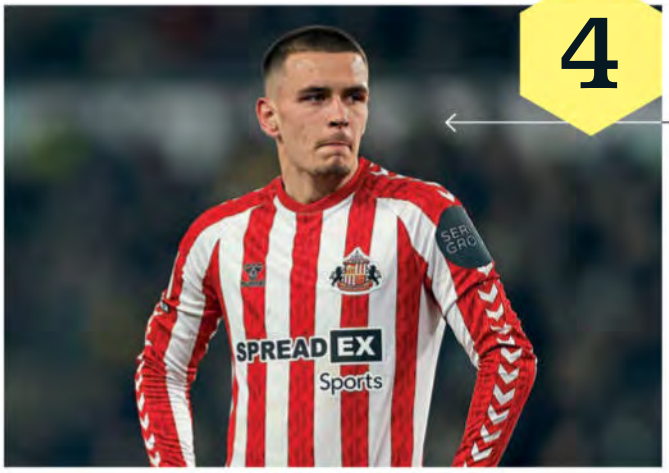
3 Luiz HENRIQUE

BOTAFOGO TO ZENIT ST PETERSBURG

The hero of Botafogo's Libertadores triumph, Henrique was named South American Footballer of the Year for 2024. But having only joined them from Real Betis last January, his time in Rio proved fleeting after Zenit paid a reported €33m to sign him.

The appeal for Zenit, chasing their seventh successive league crown, is obvious: Henrique is a proven winner with the ability to open up defences with his direct dribbling. Yet, with Russian clubs barred from UEFA competition, it feels a shame that such a talent will no longer play in continental competition. Having broken into Brazil's squad last year, he may find it difficult to add to his six caps and two international goals.

Henrique will replace his fellow Brazilian Claudinho, who left Zenit for Qatari side Al Sadd.



4 Enzo LE FEE

ROMA TO SUNDERLAND

Ahead of the 2023-24 season, following a transfer from Lorient to Rennes, we described Le Fee as "one of his generation's leading talents", so it would be fair to say that we did not expect him to be playing in the Championship just 18 months later.

Yet this move says as much about Sunderland's resources and smart recruitment as it does about the Frenchman's struggles. Black Cats boss Regis Le Bris was head of youth development and then manager of Lorient when Le Fee emerged from their academy, and together they took the club up from Ligue 2 as champions.

Initially a loan agreement, Sunderland have the option to sign the midfielder permanently in the summer, which they will undoubtedly do if he contributes to their promotion push.

5 Sebastian DRIUSSI

AUSTIN FC TO RIVER PLATE

January was particularly busy for Argentinian clubs, with many of them successfully repatriating players that had left the league for Europe, the Middle East, MLS or Brazil. River Plate led the way in that regard, re-signing a number of former stars including defenders Lucas Martinez Quarta (Fiorentina) and Gonzalo Montiel (Sevilla), plus ex-Racing midfielder Matias Rojas.

Yet attacker Driussi is the signing that prompted the most excitement – and the biggest fee. He returns to his boyhood club ten years after his breakthrough campaign of 2015, when River won the Libertadores. Now that he is reuniting with his former manager, Marcelo Gallardo, and a number of his former team-mates, River fans are hoping their team can compete on the South American stage once again.

6 Omar MARMOUSH

EINTRACHT FRANKFURT TO MANCHESTER CITY

As one of January's most expensive deals, signed to improve the fortunes of the ailing English champions, Marmoush's transfer hardly slipped under the radar.

The Egyptian clearly had the numbers to justify his price tag, contributing 15 Bundesliga goals and nine assists in just 17 games, but he also passed the eye test on his first inspection. With a lively debut against Chelsea, offering energy, sharp movement and the ability to connect well with Erling Haaland, Marmoush looked like just the man to lift Manchester City out of their slump.

FOOTBALL IN SYRIA

A country torn apart by civil war is daring to dream of a brighter footballing future

Words: John Duerden

Had Syria beaten China in June 2017 then they would have qualified for the 2018 World Cup ahead of South Korea. Just one goal would have been enough. That didn't happen and instead they went into the Asian play-off to take on Ange Postecoglou's Australia. Victory would have then meant a final elimination clash against Honduras with a place in Russia up for grabs. After a 1-1 draw at home, it was 1-1 again in the return match in Sydney. Then, in extra-time, Tim Cahill scored his second header of the game and that was that.

It was an extremely impressive run for the Qasion Eagles for a number of reasons, the most obvious being that their home games were played in Malaysia due to the security situation in Syria. If opponents had to travel to Aleppo or Damascus for big qualifiers, the results and the ultimate outcome could have been very different. Playing in front of almost empty stadiums in Southeast Asia did not make for hostile atmospheres.

The national team has not played an official game at home since 2010. The country was plunged into civil war in the following year, to devastating effect, as long-time dictator Bashar al-Assad fought to stay in power. Hundreds of thousands lost their lives and millions were displaced. But in December last year, rebel groups mounted a surprise offensive and quickly took the country's second city of Aleppo up in the north, a regular host of national team games before the war, and everything changed almost overnight. Al-Assad fled the country for Moscow, ending a dynasty that had ruled for over half a century.

THE WAR

It is not surprising that as a country turned on itself, footballers and the national team were also far from united. Al-Assad, like many leaders in history, was not averse to using the game to present an image to the rest of the world of a nation standing together.

For example, in earlier rounds of qualification for the Russia World Cup, Syria travelled to Singapore in November 2015. In the pre-match press conference, head coach Fajr Ibrahim and midfielder Osama Omari turned up wearing T-shirts with the face of Al-Assad. "We are proud because Mr. Bashar is our president," Ibrahim answered when asked if he had been told to wear the top. "So proud, because this man fights all the terrorist groups in the world; he fights for you also. He is the best man in the world. Our president follows us every step. He supports us, we play for our country and for him also."

The team were certainly committed, winning 2-1 thanks to a last-minute strike from Omar Khribin. But not

Football in Syria... a game played amid the bombed streets of Damascus

all players were behind the leader. "As the nation fractured, so did the national team," Bernd Stange, Syria's coach from 2018 to 2019, said. "There were players who fought for certain groups with weapons in their hands, and others who were staunchly opposed to the ruling regime."

In 2012, forwards Firas Al-Khatib and Omar Al-Somah decided to boycott the national team. By the time they faced Australia in 2017, they had returned to the fold. "I'm afraid, I'm afraid," Khatib, Syria's record goalscorer, told *ESPN* a few weeks earlier when asked the reason for the change of heart. "What happened is very complicated, I can't talk more about these things. [It is] better for me, better for my country, better for my family, better for everybody if I not talk about that. Whatever happens, 12 million Syrians will love me. Other 12 million will want to kill me."

It wasn't just established senior internationals who were under pressure from the ruling regime. Mohammed Jaddou, the captain of the Under-16 team and regarded as one of the brightest prospects in Asia, joined the millions who left the country in 2015. "[The Syrian government] used to threaten to end my career and punish me if I did not show up for a training camp," Jaddou told *Bleacher Report*. "The government also threatened to call me a deserter and sue me if I ever left the team."

> "As the nation fractured, so did the national team"
>
> **Bernd Stange, former Syria coach**

There was a worse fate for others. Abdul-Baset al-Sarout died in 2019 from wounds sustained fighting against government forces. The goalkeeper, who represented his country at Under-17 and Under-20 levels and played for

LEFT: Al-Assad T-shirts...Fajr Ibrahim and Osama Omari at a press conference in Singapore back in 2015

BELOW: Rebel fighter...a Syria fan waves a flag depicting Abdul-Baset al-Sarout

2006 Asian Champions League finalists Al-Karamah, hung up his gloves to fight In 2011. A prominent figure, he became well known as a revolutionary singer.

REGIME CHANGE

The departure of Al-Assad was, then, seen as a relief by many. As soon as it happened, midfielder Ammar Ramadan shared an Instagram story that read: "My country, Syria, is being freed. Resistance to oppression is inevitable. Like it or not. Bashar is a war criminal. He has also upped and left. Coward. My happiness is for the people. My people. May we see a free Palestine soon."

The Syrian Football Association also moved quickly. It released photos of a new green shirt for the national team, reflecting the colours of the independence movement and doing away with the red of the Al-Assad dynasty. "The first historical change that will take place in the history of Syrian sports, away from personal connections, patronage and corruption," the federation said on social media. The shirt was sported by smiling players and the logo also underwent a similar makeover. While there was an uncertainty that reflected the mood of a surprised, divided and devastated nation, there also seemed to be an excitement and desire to move forward.

It was fitting then that just hours after Al-Assad touched down in Moscow to start his new life, Syria were involved in the draw for the 2027 Asian Cup final round of qualification. They have been

RIGHT: National team boycott...Firas Al-Khatib, Syria's all-time record scorer

BELOW: World Cup heartbreak...Syria's players react after losing to Australia in the 2018 play-offs

grouped with Afghanistan, Myanmar and Pakistan, national teams that have, at times in the past, had to operate in politically charged environments to say the least. It all starts in March and even with only the top teams from the six groups going through (18 of the 24 places in the tournament that will be hosted in Saudi Arabia have already been filled), Syria, ranked 95th, should have more than enough to book their place. After all, in January 2024, they made the knockout stages in Qatar for the first time in their history even with the situation at home.

A bigger question is whether the team can unite a divided nation and it will help if Syria can start playing international games at home. According to Windsor John, the general secretary of the Asian Football Confederation, that is unlikely to happen in 2025. It is not just about the uncertain security situation but the fact that there are few football stadiums and facilities still standing that can host official international matches. "Syria cannot be a host...it has been over ten years now," John said. "So, we cannot see any matches being held there because it does not have the infrastructure. Perhaps, in the future... we do not know. I feel there is no change to their status as a team who have to play at a neutral venue." It will take time. Iraq is only just starting to host games in the southern city of Basra with Baghdad still not given the green light.

> "Syria cannot be a host…it has been over ten years now. We cannot see any matches being held there because it does not have the infrastructure"
>
> **Windsor John, Asian Football Confederation general secretary**

DOMESTIC MATTERS

There is, of course, more to Syrian football than Asian Cup qualification and dreams of the World Cup. For a long time, the Syrian Premier League has not been a truly nationwide competition, retreating to government strongholds such as Damascus and Latakia when the regime was struggling though expanding a little when fortunes of the ground favoured Al-Assad. At times, the league was suspended and, even when it was running, many felt that there was favouritism towards some clubs. Referees and assistants even talked of being told by administration officials not to raise offside flags against certain clubs.

Standards in the league dropped. Many players headed overseas to avoid conscription or to try to keep earning a living. Money for those who stayed, never plentiful, dried up. Investment from the private sector has been non-existent. Nobody knows what is going to happen in any part of the country going forward but there is a need for hard work and cash. It also needs a lot of attention on the boring but hugely important stuff: basic rules

Historic achievement ...Syria celebrate reaching the Asian Cup knockout stage for the first time

Euphoria...Omar Khribin celebrates after scoring v India to fire Syria through to the 2023 Asian Cup knockout rounds

and regulations and free elections for officials at regional and national federations who can then start working together. "Only then can we consider this the end of the first stage, after which we can move to other aspects, such as developing the technical aspects of clubs and national teams and improving the conditions of facilities and organising various tournaments," says sports journalist Anas Amou.

Al-Assad knew that the sport could help unify the country and bolster support for his regime. The same is still true of the new leadership. Football continued over the past 14 years and the national team showed that it could compete with the rest of the continent even in the midst of civil war. If there is to be a new era of peace and stability then there may, in the years to come, be a new power in Asian football.

Green future... a photo released by the Syrian FA of the team's new kit

Capital rivals...Joao Simoes of Sporting and Benfica's Angel Di Maria clash during the Lisbon derby

ALL CHANGE AT *TRES GRANDES*

Moving parts in Portuguese football make for an unpredictable future for the Big Three

Words: Tom Kundert

One year ago, Roger Schmidt, Sergio Conceicao and Ruben Amorim all looked set for the long haul at Benfica, Porto and Sporting respectively. Yet here we are, a few months into the 2024-25 campaign, and all three of Portugal's major clubs have swapped coaches. Throw in the end of Jorge Nuno Pinto da Costa's 42-year presidency at Porto, the volatility surrounding Benfica's own upcoming presidential elections and the end of Amorim's hugely successful stint at reigning champions Sporting, and it's tough to say which club has undergone the most dramatic change.

Throughout 100 years of Portuguese football history, one of the *Tres Grandes* has tended to dominate the domestic scene. Sporting's golden epoch, inspired by the "five violins" came in the 1940s and '50s, before Eusebio arrived and made Benfica the masters of the land – and of Europe for a while – during the 1960s and '70s.

The arrival of Pinto da Costa as Porto's president signalled another dramatic shift as the power base of Portuguese football moved out of the capital. The Dragons swept up most of the trophies in the two decades straddling the turn of the millennium, alongside significant international glory.

Benfica threatened to wrest their hegemony back by winning four league titles in a row between 2014 and 2017, but the Lisbon giants couldn't sustain the run. In fact, the club instead entered a period of instability in the wake of the resignation of club president Luis Filipe Vieira in 2021.

Since then, it has been a free-for-all. While Portugal's Primeira Liga is sharply lopsided given the gulf in quality between the only three clubs that can realistically win it and the rest, looking through the prism of the title contenders alone, it is fiercely competitive, distinctly more so than Europe's major leagues dominated by one or two clubs. No side has retained the Portuguese title in the last seven years, with two each for Sporting and Benfica and three for Porto.

All change...Spain striker Samu Aghehowa has been prolific since joining Porto from Atletico Madrid

PORTO'S ARDUOUS TRANSITION

ABOVE: Sacked... former Porto head coach Vitor Bruno

LEFT: Outgoing president...then-Porto boss Sergio Conceicao kisses the head of Jorge Nuno Pinto da Costa during the election campaign

Probably the most profound change has occurred at northern powerhouse Porto. Jorge Nuno Pinto da Costa was nicknamed "the Pope" in Portugal due to his seemingly unlimited power and influence. His landslide election defeat was therefore a startling event as he was ousted by his former coach turned foe, Andre Villas-Boas. Pinto da Costa is a towering figure of Portuguese football in general and of Porto in particular, but the vote was unequivocal. The octogenarian garnered just 20 per cent of a record turnout.

However, the perilous financial state the club finds itself in and the devotion of Pinto da Costa's hard-line supporters who have stayed loyal to him have made life very difficult for his successor. Poor performances have been met with loud booing from the Super Dragoes, the club's largest supporters' group, who had extremely close ties with the former president. The lack of support from a section of their own fans has visibly upset and angered some of the players. Moreover, any setback is pounced upon by Villas-Boas' detractors. Graffiti calling him a "traitor" has appeared at the training ground, around the city and near his home, forcing the new supremo to hire a private security firm to provide him with protection.

> Villas-Boas faces an almighty task trying to unify two factions among the club's fanbase

Villas-Boas faces an almighty task trying to unify two factions among the club's fanbase that have such an emotive wedge separating them. That is even before we talk about the dire financial situation that forced AVB to dip into his own personal fortune to pay the players' wages upon taking office via a non-interest loan to the club. The last-minute collapse of a €50 million transfer of Brazilian winger Wenderson Galeno to Saudi club Al Ittihad last summer has kept the pressure on the treasury and the squad-strengthening options to a minimum.

Porto president... Andre Villas-Boas celebrates after his triumphant election victory last April

Given the volatile backdrop, Porto have done well to stay in the running for a league title that has evaded them in the last two seasons. The Blue and Whites remained on Sporting's coattails at the halfway stage of the season under the guidance of Vitor Bruno, but the former assistant of previous boss Sergio Conceicao did little to convince Porto's fans he was the right man for the job. Uninspiring football, regular defeats when facing stronger opposition – including an embarrassing 4-1 capitulation against Benfica – disappointing early exits from both domestic cups and a stuttering European campaign led to increasing noise about the suitability of Bruno for the dugout. Three successive defeats in January, the latter two costing Porto the chance to go top of the table, proved the final straw and the 42-year-old was given his marching orders.

In late January, Argentine Martin Anselmi was recruited from Mexican side Cruz Azul to replace Bruno. Like Villas-Boas himself, the 39-year-old became a coach with no professional playing experience to his name. If he is not successful, it will be yet another stick with which to beat the president.

SPORTING STILL REELING FROM AMORIM EXIT

Obrigado, Ruben... Sporting fans say thank you to their old manager

It was all going so well. Historically so. Ruben Amorim had followed up two championship triumphs in four seasons with his finest creation yet. Sporting, in the first three months of 2024-25, were a sight to behold. The Lions blew away all-comers, winning 17 and drawing one of 18 matches (which included a 4-1 Champions League dismantling of Manchester City) playing breathtaking football, and were apparently breezing their way to a second successive league title, which would be the first time the famous Lisbon club had gone back-to-back since their heyday 70 years ago.

No wonder Manchester United came knocking. Amorim initially asked them to wait until the end of the season. United said "now or never," and that was that.

While it was inevitable that the departure of a figure who had brought about such a profound upturn in fortunes at the club would be keenly felt, the instantaneous and calamitous impact of his exit took everyone by surprise. Hiring from within seemed a sensible idea at the time. Joao Pereira, who had finished his playing career under Amorim in Sporting's 2020-21 championship win and who had cut his coaching teeth with Sporting's U23 and B teams, was given the job. It did not take long to discover Pereira was completely unprepared for the step up. Four straight defeats resulted in his removal almost before the ink had dried on his contract.

Sporting turned to Rui Borges, who had built a fine reputation working his way up the managerial ladder and whose Vitoria Guimaraes team was enjoying an outstanding European campaign. The 43-year-old faced a baptism of fire with Benfica, Vitoria, Porto and Benfica again his first four games, while simultaneously having to deal with an injury crisis. He came out of the trial by fire well: two wins, a draw and a penalty-shootout defeat to Benfica in the league cup final. More than the results or displays, Borges looked the part, striking up a healthy rapport with his players and handling the media glare with admirable acumen.

Succeeding Sporting's greatest-ever coach was always going to be tough. The early signs are that Rui Borges is making a decent fist of it but, given the superiority the Lions demonstrated over their arch-rivals in recent times, anything other than a championship win will be seen as failure.

Benfica president ...Rui Costa

BENFICA PRESIDENT RUI COSTA FEELING THE HEAT

"He played football like he was smoking a cigar," it has been said of Rui Costa, one of the most elegant and aesthetically pleasing number tens the game has ever seen. With the ball at his feet, Costa exuded class and a sense of being in complete control. Steering the fortunes of Portugal's largest football club as Benfica president, however, has proven an altogether more stressful task.

Costa surprised everyone when he stuck with the fantastically unpopular Roger Schmidt as the head coach after an underwhelming 2023-24 season. It was a huge risk and, sure enough, a defeat and a draw in Benfica's first two away games of the new campaign created a level of toxicity that made the German's position untenable. Schmidt was replaced by former Wolves and Botafogo coach Bruno Lage, for his second spell in charge.

The first time around, Lage had begun brilliantly, clawing back a seven-point deficit in just half a season to win the 2018-19 league title, but things unravelled badly the following year. A disastrous spell of two wins in his final 13 matches at Benfica led to Lage's dismissal and also explains the lukewarm reaction to his reappointment. His work abroad had also done little to enhance his reputation. At Wolves, his tenure followed a similar pattern, a bright start followed by an alarming slide and an inability to halt it. In Brazil at Botafogo, he skipped the first part and went straight to the bad run of results: 15 games, four wins only, and sacked after three months.

Nonetheless, just like in 2019, Lage started extremely brightly, reeling off ten wins and a draw in his first 11 league matches, including Benfica's biggest win over Porto in 60 years and a thrilling 4-0 thrashing of Atletico Madrid in the Champions League.

> Steering the fortunes of Portugal's largest football club as Benfica president has proven altogether more stressful for Rui Costa

But the sheen wore off and a series of insipid performances bookended by successive defeats against Sporting and Braga had the alarm bells ringing as Benfica missed the chance to hit top spot at the halfway point, before the league cup triumph in early January lifted the mood again.

At such a demanding club, ferocious criticism is unavoidable whenever Benfica lose a game and Lage has had to show a thick skin since returning to Lisbon. But it is Costa and the administration that have borne the brunt of the anger

Portugal's most supported club ...Benfica

of a fanbase quick to express their disgruntlement whenever Benfica lie in a position other than first place. The scattergun approach to transfers and lack of a discernible long-term strategy are the chief gripes of supporters who believe that Portugal's most popular club by far should always be the dominant force in the country.

UP FOR GRABS

Whether or not one of the Big Three will step forward is impossible to predict in the current climate where Porto, Sporting and Benfica are all going through varying degrees of flux. It is fascinating to speculate on the possible significant long-term implications of a championship triumph this season in what is shaping up to be one of the most exciting title races in years. Stealing a march on their two storied rivals at a time of great uncertainty could yet pave the way for the next period of hegemony, especially with only the winners guaranteed a spot in the Champions League. But for whom?

SPECIAL FEATURE

TURNING 30

As Major League Soccer welcomes its 30th club ahead of its 30th season, **Jon Arnold** reflects on the last three decades of top-flight soccer in the United States

Even the most diligent followers of Major League Soccer, those who have seen all 29 past seasons, will struggle to decide which "version" of MLS the league is now running.

The start of the MLS 2.0 era was clear. David Beckham arrived amidst a boom of clubs building their own venues, stadiums that would allow them to create better environments than those fans experienced in cavernous stadiums shared with American football teams – and crucially let them keep more of the revenue generated on matchdays.

Now, Lionel Messi is here, matches are broadcast almost exclusively on Apple's streaming service and teams increasingly not only buy top talents from abroad but produce rising stars in their academies.

As the league prepares to turn 30, whether we're living MLS 4.0, 5.0 or still stuck somewhere in the 3.3 range depends on who you ask. Long-time commissioner Don Garber sees a bright future for the league, and plenty of independent analysts agree. Others feel the league is making missteps that will keep it from ever reaching its stated goal of being one of the best in the world – and from ever competing with the US sports behemoths like the NFL and NBA that always have loomed as insurmountable rivals.

What is certain is no one could've seen just how the league would grow and evolve when it started play in 1996.

MLS started because of one World Cup and now is betting much of its future on seeing a boom from another. The league launched in the wake of the 1994 tournament on US soil, a success from a business perspective thanks to the American football stadiums, the eager community of curious American fans, and the huge diaspora populations living in the US.

While the strength of the star players on display and the match-ups at the international tournament meant there was little doubt supporters would fill the venues for the World Cup, getting people to turn up for San Jose Clash v Tampa Bay Mutiny was always going to be a bigger challenge.

The spectacular flare, then collapse, of the North American Soccer League ▶

Turning 30...Major League Soccer

MLS 2.0...David Beckham's arrival started a new era of Major League Soccer

more than a decade earlier occupied the brain of many in the US soccer community. Big crowds showed up for matches in the late 1970s and 1980s, seeing stars like Pele, Johan Cruyff, Franz Beckenbauer and Eusebio, but the league bit off more than it could chew and ceased operations in 1984.

MLS's goal, then, was to avoid the errors of the past and become sustainable, something it appears to have done. But it was never exactly straightforward.

There is an anecdote now often shared, the type of story that is only told because things all worked out later. On the verge of bankruptcy in 2001, Garber met with club owners Lamar Hunt, Robert Kraft and Philip Anschutz, convincing them not only to put up more cash and control additional franchises but also to accept risks. The biggest of these was the creation of Soccer United Marketing (SUM) as the league's marketing arm, which also served as a vehicle for World Cup television rights, Mexico national team matches in the US and other ventures that provided cash and, functionally, saved the league.

> MLS started because of one World Cup and now is betting much of its future on seeing a boom from another

Once SUM had MLS owners comfortable investing their dollars again, LA Galaxy made one of the biggest splashes ever, the size of which matched those of the NASL. Beckham's arrival not only led to silverware for the Galaxy and sold-out crowds all over the country, filling the stadiums of the other owners in the league, it also saw MLS loosen its restrictive roster rules ever so slightly.

The familiar faces who have arrived since then have nearly all arrived as "Designated Players", players whose full salaries don't count against the league's salary cap. The league has increased

TOP: Inaugural... the first-ever MLS match back in 1996

ABOVE LEFT: Long-serving...Don Garber has been MLS commissioner since 1999

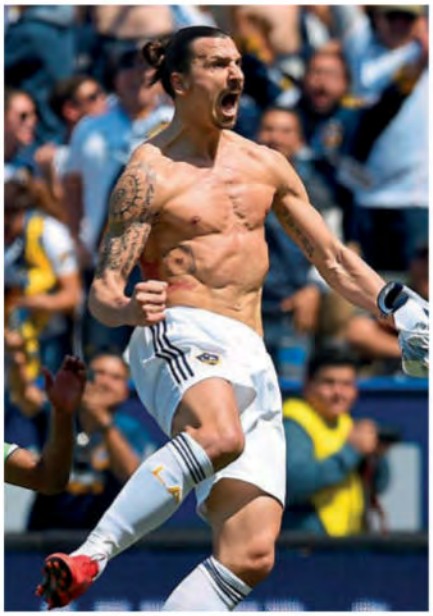
ABOVE RIGHT: The Philip F. Anschutz trophy...the MLS Cup is named after one of the league's co-founders

the number of slots each team has, but even now there is frustration about the handcuffs owners willingly put on themselves when building a roster.

While the league struggled to make supporters care in its existing markets, plenty of fans from outside the MLS footprint wanted in. The league's move into Canada saw Toronto FC become a tremendous success off the field, immediately standing as one of the best atmospheres in MLS – even as the team on the field struggled. Other teams had built-in fanbases as lower-division clubs with the Seattle Sounders, Portland Timbers and Vancouver Whitecaps entering the league already boasting decades of soccer history and a pre-existing rivalry in their fight for the Cascadia Cup, awarded each year to the team with the best head-to-head record among the Pacific Northwest rivals.

If those teams were traditional for the North American market, the next wave of expansion saw teams add flash. In addition to stadiums purpose-built for the club, a model established by Hunt with the Columbus Crew and FC Dallas and Anschutz with LA Galaxy, teams that joined from 2015 onwards often made splashy signings. Los Angeles FC opened its venue near downtown LA with Mexico star Carlos Vela as its club captain. Fans responded. The club started popular and only grew more relevant as it won the Supporters' Shield in 2019 behind Vela's brilliant MVP season and an MLS Cup in 2022 – thanks in part to a key goal from mid-season import Gareth Bale.

The willingness to chase trophies with flagship additions like Vela and Bale, though, challenged some of the league's initial owners. Some haven't caught up. Teams in legacy markets like Dallas, Denver and Boston – or Chicago, which joined in 1998 – have never broken through into the consciousness of mainstream sports fans in their cities in the way that LAFC, Atlanta United or St. Louis City have. The new teams also pay big money to join the league: San Diego FC begin play this season and reportedly shelled out $500 million for the privilege.



Designated Players... Beckham opened the door for more big signings like Carlos Vela, Clint Dempsey and Zlatan Ibrahimovic

That dwarfs the $110m LAFC paid in 2014, but *Forbes* now values that club at $1 billion.

That's not to say it's impossible for legacy teams to find the same spark. With the threat of a move to Austin looming, fans in Columbus, perhaps the league's most unlikely market, banded together to save their club. Rather than move the franchise from Ohio to Texas, the league agreed to keep the Crew where it had been and grant the want-away ownership group an expansion team in Texas instead. Austin FC have been a success but nowhere near as successful as Columbus, which is now a model team for the league, lifting trophies and filling the stadium it opened in 2021 with thousands and thousands of fans.

At the moment, MLS is beginning its third season of a deal with tech giant Apple to stream every match worldwide on the Apple TV service. Results have been mixed. Hard-core fans are able to watch each match in high quality, but there is some concern that casual fans aren't tuning in. Some of those fears were allayed midway through the first season of the deal when Inter Miami owners David Beckham and the Mas brothers decided to splash the cash to bring Messi to the league.

Messi's arrival has put MLS in front of thousands more fans in the US and

MLS club number 30 ...San Diego FC joins the league for 2025

around the world. While still far from the charismatic spokesperson Beckham was happy to be when he joined the league, the few words Messi says and what he does on the field are enough to break through. Beyond the Apple deal, the league put a Messi cam on TikTok, following his every movement during a play-off match. He is on billboards, digital advertising and is the subject of various programmes that live next to MLS matches in the Apple interface. His pink Inter Miami jersey is now one of the most recognisable replica shirts ever, spotted in dozens of countries. He has done well on the field, winning the Leagues Cup – an attempt with Liga MX at fusing the two leagues for a month in a knockout tournament – upon arrival and the Supporters' Shield in 2024 but falling short of lifting the MLS Cup.

There are very legitimate questions about what the league does when Messi decides his career has come to an end – or that he'd rather close it out in Barcelona, Rosario or any other locale. The league has not told its story well beyond riding the Messi wave, and it would be no huge surprise if those new spectators, who have shown up and tuned in to see Messi specifically, decided to leave and watch something else when Messi is no longer on the field.

> There are very legitimate questions about what the league does when Messi decides his career has come to an end

But there also is legitimate success to point at. The league announced in December that 12.1 million spectators had attended MLS matches in 2024 – the second-best figure in the world behind only England's Premier League (14.6 million). Of course, having 29 teams in one league gives it an advantage over other top flights, but there are very good crowds of passionate fans in nearly every MLS stadium. The matchday experience in most grounds in the US holds its own against most others across the world.

Yet, as MLS enters its 30th season, there is no sign of the constant analysis, concern, complaints or cheerleading stopping any time soon. The league will stay under the microscope, with its backers extolling its virtues and its critics pointing out its flaws.

Soccer is here to stay in the US and Canada. So, too is MLS, with many new "versions" no doubt around the corner.

Turn to page 90 for a preview of the 2025 MLS season.

Another landmark transfer...Beckham unveils Lionel Messi as a new signing for Inter Miami in 2023

Ones to watch

Nick Bidwell picks out the players to keep an eye on in the knockout stage of European football's elite club competition

Ryan GRAVENBERCH

LIVERPOOL

Bayern Munich must feel that they missed the boat on seeing the born-again Dutch defensive midfielder, 22, suddenly emerge this season as a key component in Liverpool's concerted push for silverware, a virtual ever-present in a side that has dominated in both the Premier League and new-fangled Champions League group phase.

At Bayern, whom he joined from mother club Ajax in an €18.5 million deal in the summer of 2022, Gravenberch's reputation as something of a European boy wonder cut little ice in his one and only campaign at the Allianz Arena, restricted to just 938 minutes of competitive action and starting just three times in the Bundesliga.

Midfield lynchpin... Ryan Gravenberch

Neither of Bayern's coaches that season, Julian Nagelsmann and then Thomas Tuchel, seemed prepared to put their faith in him. According to Bayern insiders, the general feeling was that the young Amsterdammer was not sufficiently disciplined defensively, that his pressing game left much to be desired. Nor did it help that he was in competition for a midfield berth with established Germany internationals Joshua Kimmich and Leon Goretzka. In the wrong place at the wrong time.

After joining Liverpool for £34.2m in the summer 2023 transfer window, Gravenberch's first season on Merseyside was hardly a roaring success, starting only a dozen Premier League games under Jurgen Klopp and not always doing himself justice in a box-to-box role. But at least he was enjoying more game time than in Germany, a vital first stage in his resurrection.

The stars would further align for him last summer. The arrival at Anfield of new boss Arne Slot, a compatriot familiar with the youngster's massive potential, was a hugely favourable development, as was Liverpool's unsuccessful attempt to secure the signature of Real Sociedad and Spain defensive midfielder Martin Zubimendi.

Slot, well aware that Gravenberch had once impressed as double pivot

Influential... Barcelona's Raphinha scored eight goals in the league stage

for Ajax alongside Edson Alvarez, now turned to him as his Plan B in the engine room and, following a string of highly effective performances in pre-season, the job was his.

The word "revelation" is thrown around far too often in football. Gravenberch, though, has proved just that: quick to assimilate to Slot's philosophy and equally eye-catching in ball-winning mode as creatively. His ball control – especially when on the half turn – and passing are immaculate, he is full of energy and, when surging forward with the ball at his feet, regularly takes out two or three players, a gift-wrapped present for the Liverpool forwards.

So much for Bayern's harsh critique of him. Class always will out.

RAPHINHA
BARCELONA

Not so long ago, the Barcelona powerbrokers considered the Brazilian winger or attacking midfielder surplus to requirements. Today, he is the most influential figure in Hansi Flick's side, both a devastating performer and outstanding skipper.

Yann BISSECK
INTERNAZIONALE

Imposing centre-back, who seems to raise his game in the Champions League. The German-born 24-year-old, who is comfortable in any role in the back three, was outstanding in the league phase against Manchester City and Arsenal.

Piero HINCAPIE
BAYER LEVERKUSEN

If certain sections of the German media are to be believed, the *Werkself* management rate the remarkably consistent Ecuador centre-back in the €70m-bracket. A bit-part performer last season, his is now undroppable.

Giuliano SIMEONE
ATLETICO MADRID

Atletico coach Diego Simeone has three footballing sons and the youngest, electric frontrunner Giuliano, could well be the most talented. A breakout sensation this season, the 22-year-old product of the Atletico youth academy is quick, direct and indefatigable.

Breakout star... Giuliano Simeone

Youri TIELEMANS
ASTON VILLA

No other Villa player has more European competition experience (60-odd games over a dozen years) than the talented and versatile Belgium midfielder. The ex-Anderlecht, Monaco and Leicester City man is playing the best football of his career.

Hakan CALHANOGLU
INTERNAZIONALE

After suffering with inconsistency for much of his career, the German-born Turkey international has dramatically come of age with Inter, developing into an impeccable all-round midfielder.

Cody GAKPO
LIVERPOOL

Arne Slot made a wise decision at the start of the season when switching the Dutch hot-shot from a central striker berth – which he frequently occupied in his first Anfield campaign last term – to his best position wide on the left.

Osame SAHRAOUI
LILLE

Slowly but surely, the European game is waking up to the huge potential of this extravagantly gifted left-winger, who arrived last summer from Dutch outfit Heerenveen. Born in Norway, he plays internationally for Morocco, the homeland of his parents.

Gabriel MARTINELLI
ARSENAL

With star winger Bukayo Saka out for a considerable period with a hamstring injury, the onus is on the pacy Brazilian – along with the outstanding breakout talent Ethan Nwaneri – to take up the slack in the wide areas. The time is ripe for Martinelli to fully unlock his potential and to assume more responsibility.

Marc CASADO
BARCELONA

Ferociously competitive homegrown defensive midfielder known as "Pitbull" or "Piranha" in the Barca dressing room. Never on the radar of former *Blaugrana* coach Xavi, his successor Hansi Flick loves his football IQ as much as his grit.

Rodrigo DE PAUL
ATLETICO MADRID

Now in his fourth year in Spain, the Argentina midfielder, 30, has become indispensable for the *Colchoneros*. Everything of value in the Atletico engine room comes through him, especially his ability to up the tempo.

Ones to watch

Nick Bidwell highlights 12 stars that could light up the Europa League knockouts

Lazio goal king ...Boulaye Dia

Boulaye DIA

LAZIO

No one in the Lazio squad will be more determined to shine for the *Biancocelesti* in the latter stages of the Europa League than their in-form Senegalese international frontrunner. This spring, the 28-year-old has a spot of unfinished business to attend to in continental competition.

A member of the Villarreal squad that seriously upset the odds to reach the semi-finals of the Champions League in 2021-22 – seeing off the likes of Juventus and Bayern Munich before falling to Liverpool at the penultimate hurdle – Dia was a bit-part player for the Yellow Submarine that season, either manacled to the bench or sidelined by a knee ligament injury. As Villarreal's progress gathered momentum, he was basically an onlooker –although he did at least have the satisfaction of scoring the opener in his side's 3-2 home defeat to Jurgen Klopp's charges in the second leg of the semi-final.

This time around, the French-born Dia, who hails from the Ain region of eastern France and who played for Jura Sud and Reims prior to joining Villarreal in 2021, will not be part of an underdog crew in Europe. After becoming the first team to qualify automatically for the 2024-25 Europa League last 16, the Lazio Sky Blues are one of the favourites to go all the way. And quite rightly so.

Brought in last summer on a two-year loan deal from fellow Italian club Salernitana, Dia can only be delighted as to how well the move to Lazio has worked out. Last season at Salernitana, who finished dead last in Serie A with just two victories to their name, was nothing less than a nightmare for him: hindered by a troublesome thigh injury and then sparking controversy in March when coach Fabio Liverani revealed Dia refused to come off the bench late on against Udinese, a misjudged act that made him persona non grata at the club.

Fortunately for him, an escape route would be offered by Lazio, where he has performed superbly in a variety of roles: as a second striker, attacking

Bright spark... Kulusevski scores against Rangers

midfielder and centre-forward. He has struck up a particularly impressive partnership with the Argentine striker Taty Castellanos, the latter operating as leader of the line while the Senegal star prompts, probes and expresses himself just behind. Little wonder Lazio coach Marco Baroni swears by the pair. With Dia and Castellanos in tow, Lazio always have a chance of victory. The same cannot be said when one or both are removed from the equation.

As a *Gazzetta dello Sport* reporter so aptly put it following a man-of-the-match display from Dia in a 3-0 Serie A victory at Verona in January: "Between the attacking midfield line and the point of attack, Dia was Lazio's sword."

AMAD Diallo
MANCHESTER UNITED

Brilliant two-footed Ivorian, 22, who is capable of making an impact as a winger, wing-back or attacking midfielder. Part of a United side that still flatters to deceive, he has become a beacon of hope and defiance for Ruben Amorim's outfit.

Ayoub EL KAABI
OLYMPIACOS

The prolific Moroccan striker was much to the fore as Olympiacos won last season's Conference League, and has continued to pile up the goals in Europe this campaign, adding seven to the 16 that he plundered in 2023-24.

Gustav ISAKSEN
LAZIO

It should come as no surprise that the highly-gifted young Dane, 23, is a huge fan of Liverpool's Mo Salah, a fellow member of the right-wing union. Isaksen claims his love of chess helps his decision-making on the pitch.

Ansgar KNAUFF
EINTRACHT FRANKFURT

Whenever the Eagles need some inspiration going forward, they look to the Germany Under-21 mainstay, who is worth his weight in gold with his dynamism, agility and ability to make things happen whichever flank he is on.

Dynamic dribbler ...Ansgar Knauff

Dejan KULUSEVSKI
TOTTENHAM

In a season that has left Spurs supporters bitter and bruised, the form of their Swedish attacking midfielder has been one of the very few positive notes. The 24-year-old has contributed so much more since switching from the right side to a more central role.

Lucas PERRI
LYON

While some OL fans were unhappy that long-serving keeper Anthony Lopes was benched and then joined Nantes in the winter window, most of the Groupama stadium faithful have now moved on, won over by the shot-stopping class of the 27-year-old Brazilian, who was signed from sister club Botafogo in 2023.

Nicolas RASKIN
RANGERS

Some 15 years after Barry Ferguson departed the Ibrox scene, the Gers have finally found an adequate replacement in the shape of Raskin. Impressive as a box-to-box midfielder, but even better as a combative yet enterprising number six.

Oihan SANCET
ATHLETIC CLUB

Nominally lining up as a number ten, the Pamplona-born Spain international is responsible for much of Athletic's attacking output. A mesmeric dribbler, a specialist in slick one-twos and an exceptional finisher.

Arthur THEATE
EINTRACHT FRANKFURT

The Belgian, previously with Oostende and Bologna, offers enormous flexibility, outstanding at left-back or in central defence. Solid, combative and renowned for his accurate long-range passes, Eintracht have him on loan from Rennes with the option to buy in the summer.

Manuel UGARTE
MANCHESTER UNITED

Ever-feisty Uruguayan midfield warrior, who has brought much-needed solidity to United with his energy, work-rate and visceral love of a confrontation. New Old Trafford manager Ruben Amorim used to coach him at Sporting, and Ugarte's knowledge of the Portuguese coach's system has made him a valuable asset.

Dani VIVIAN
ATHLETIC CLUB

Once a keen martial artist, Vivian is the embodiment of a typical Basque defender: strong, rugged and totally committed. A back-up for Spain in their Euro 2024 triumph, he is pacy too, one of the quickest at the club.

Ones to watch

Nick Bidwell outlines the players that will help define the Conference League knockouts

Gustavo SILVA

VITORIA GUIMARAES

For cultural and linguistic reasons, Brazilian talent has always gravitated towards Portuguese clubs and, in the form of Gustavo Silva, Vitoria Guimaraes look to have picked up a real bargain. The all-purpose forward only cost €500,000 from Sao Paulo state outfit Comercial FC last summer, but has suddenly become a key player for his new club.

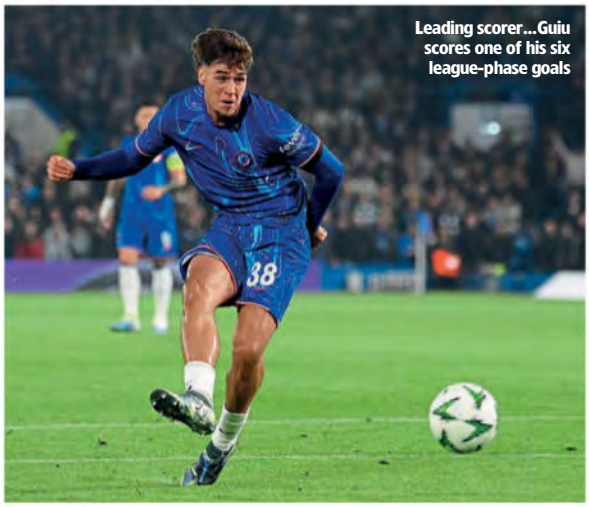
Silva, 25, spent the last two seasons on loan at Madeiran side Nacional – the former stomping ground of one Cristiano Ronaldo – and was particularly impressive last term, contributing 12 goals and 11 assists to the club's promotion to the top flight. Named in the league's Team of the Season for 2023-24, Silva was irresistible throughout; too quick, too powerful and too opportunistic for markers to handle. Although nominally used on the right flank, the hard-running Brazilian could turn up anywhere along the front-line, especially dangerous when running in behind on the counter-attack.

Last man standing ...Gustavo Silva

All of which is made more impressive by the fact that Nacional did not recruit him originally as a forward: in his first season in Madeira, he mainly served as a tough and athletic midfield enforcer, occasionally filling in at stopper and at right-back.

Nacional coach Tiago Margarido deserves a ton of praise for successfully switching him to an attacking role, and it's hardly surprising that Silva's sound defensive habits very much remain in evidence. He tracks back with gusto, is a feisty tackler and thinks nothing of putting his body on the line during opposition set-pieces.

So far this campaign, Gustavo has featured in three different positions for the *Conquistadores* (Conquerors) – on either wing and at centre-forward – and has certainly enjoyed his first taste of European competition, netting in the Conference League against Celje, St Gallen and Fiorentina, and generally going over and above the call of duty for the undefeated Vitoria, who finished second in the league phase behind


Leading scorer...Guiu scores one of his six league-phase goals

Chelsea. He was laid low by a nasty thigh injury at the turn of the year, but is expected to be back in action for the last 16 in March.

What Gustavo and his team-mates urgently need is a period of stability and consolidation. Ever since brilliant young coach Rui Borges was lured to Sporting just after Christmas, all has gone wrong for the northerners. Borges' replacement Daniel Sousa only lasted three games before the axe fell, with three of the club's most accomplished performers also moving on: right-back Alberto Costa to Juventus, midfielder Manu to Benfica and Brazilian winger Kaio Cesar to Saudi team Al Hilal. The onus, then, is on Gustavo to lead the team's new-look attack.

Marc GUIU
CHELSEA

The 19-year-old Catalan striker, lured away from Barcelona in the 2024 off-season, has found goals easy to come by in this term's Conference League. A typical old-school centre-forward: tough, physical and aerially proficient. He'll be hoping his European displays can push him into the first-team picture for the Blues' Premier League action.

Dion BELJO
RAPID VIENNA

The famous old Viennese club struck gold last summer when persuading German side Augsburg to let them have the 22-year-old Croatian striker on loan. A big man with a delicate touch, he has been piling up the goals in Austria.

LUQUINHAS
LEGIA WARSAW

Former New York Red Bulls coach Gerhard Struber was absolutely correct when, in 2022, he described his team's Brazilian winger as a player "with dribbling skills from another planet". The comment remains relevant today.

Lucas BELTRAN
FIORENTINA

A goalscoring centre-forward in his early days in Argentina at River Plate, Beltran rarely delivered in that role after joining Fiorentina for €20 million in July 2023. Now enjoying a second wind with the *Viola* as a creative and industrious playmaker.

Fiorentina duo... Moise Kean and Lucas Beltran

Deniz HUMMET
DJURGARDENS

Arguably the most accomplished forward in the Swedish top flight last season, the 28-year-old was in the form of his life in 2024, alternating between moments of unforgettable finesse and fiercely-struck goals from distance.

Filip JORGENSEN
CHELSEA

Much, much more than a back-up keeper. Acquired from Villarreal last summer for over £20m, the Denmark Under-21 international has excelled in the Conference League this campaign, particularly impressive in the 2-0 win at Heidenheim in November.

Moise KEAN
FIORENTINA

After many years of unfulfilled early career promise, including spells at Verona, Everton, PSG and a third stint with Juventus last season, the 24-year-old has suddenly turned goalscoring renaissance man in Florence.

Serge-Philippe RAUX-YAO
RAPID VIENNA

Paris-born-and-raised centre-back, who combines immense physicality and a skyscraper build with an elegant, progressive style, perfectly at ease bringing the ball out from the back or breaking the lines with an incisive pass.

Christiaan RAVYCH
CERCLE BRUGGE

Outstanding Belgium Under-21 centre-back of Ukrainian lineage. Spent a decade learning his trade in the Club Brugge academy prior to signing a semi-pro contract with the city's second club Cercle in 2021.

Renato STEFFEN
LUGANO

Still going strong at the age of 33, the former Young Boys, Basel and Wolfsburg winger was Switzerland's Player of the Year for 2024. Vehemently disagrees with anyone who claims that his long national team career is over.

Bruno VARELA
VITORIA GUIMARAES

Vitoria's underrated goalkeeper and skipper. A product of the Benfica youth system, he spent a couple of years (2019-20) on loan at Ajax, and was part of the squad that reached the Champions League semis in 2018-19.

Champions League surprise packages ...Brest celebrate a goal in Europe's elite club competition

THE ULTIMATE UNDERDOGS

How French minnows Brest became the story of this season's Champions League

Words: Luke Entwistle

Breton clubs are renowned for their player development. In the past it was the likes of Marcel Desailly, Didier Deschamps, Sylvain Wiltord and Yoann Gourcuff, while more recently Eduardo Camavinga, Ousmane Dembele, Desire Doue, Randal Kolo Muani, Mathys Tel, Matteo Guendouzi and Jordan Veretout have emerged from the region.

Yet despite being surrounded by such a fertile breeding ground of footballing talent, Brest remained impotent. None of those players listed above were developed at the club, which for so long has been dwarfed by its bigger neighbours: Rennes, Nantes, even Lorient, and at times Guingamp.

Now though, having secured European football for the first time in their 75-year history, Brest are enjoying their moment in the sun.

In Brittany, Brest have always been the small club in the big pond; they don't have the means to compete or the facilities to match. Both Claude Makelele and Franck Ribery spent brief one-year stints at the club before going on to break through elsewhere, the former at rivals Nantes (technically no longer a part of Brittany but, as the historic capital of the region, still considered to be so by many of its inhabitants) and the latter at Metz.

As a result, *Les Ty-Zefs* are something of an outlier in French football in the sense that they don't subscribe to the model of developing players and selling them on. It is not necessarily a conscious choice, but rather a reality determined by regional dynamics: they simply can't attract the best local players.

Instead, they go to the likes of Rennes and Nantes, who not only boast superior facilities but also have a history of developing players that is enticing for any young prospect looking to make the right career move at such a critical juncture. When it comes to academies, reputation matters – and reputation is what Brest have lacked, and still do despite their fairy-tale run to the Champions League.

Stade Brestois, founded back in 1950 following a merging of five local clubs, were only promoted to the old Division 1 for the first time in 1979 and, as recently as 2004, were still competing in amateur football.

Theirs is a fate not alien to French clubs. Amid financial difficulties, they were demoted to the lower echelons of the French game, renouncing their professional status in the early 1990s. Historic clubs such as Strasbourg and even more recently Bordeaux, now competing in the fourth tier, have since trodden a similar path.

Like Strasbourg, Brest rose from the dead, climbing their way back up the pyramid. It hasn't been a spectacular, sharp rise but more of an incremental and non-linear one. After returning to professional football via a promotion to Ligue 2 in 2004, it took them six years to return to the top flight, where they stayed for three years before dropping back down to the second tier. There they remained for a further six seasons before another promotion thanks to a second-place finish under journeyman

manager Jean-Marc Furlan in the 2018-19 season.

This is therefore a club that, unlike Rennes and Nantes, do not have a history of competing consistently in the top tier, certainly not recently. It is a lived experience that makes them, if not unambitious then certainly cautious. And their recent meteoric rise has not changed that.

Brest, since their return to the elite, have aspired to be a team of the *ventre mou* – literally meaning "soft stomach" – a term used to describe the mid-table spots in Ligue 1. When Eric Roy arrived at the club in January 2023, such a standing seemed like a distant dream.

His predecessor, Michel Der Zakarian, left the club in 17th place in Ligue 1 with just three victories in the first half of the 2022-23 season. Roy, whose previous senior managerial position was all the way back in 2011, was an unlikely pick to help the Pirates stave off relegation.

Yet, despite minimal incomings during the winter transfer window, Roy turned the tide. By the end of the campaign, Brest were nine points clear of the relegation zone.

After a summer outlay of just €8 million, another relegation battle was expected for the following season. Instead, Roy and his team produced one of the biggest shocks in recent football history, certainly the biggest in France since Montpellier's unlikely triumph in the 2011-12 season, as the side qualified for the league phase of the new-look Champions League.

Another relegation battle was expected for the 2023-24 season. Instead, coach Eric Roy and his team produced one of the biggest shocks in recent football history

Roy's side are not packed with quality but he imbued a collective that had been struggling with confidence, allowing the individuals within it to reach unforeseen levels.

"When [Roy] arrived, he adopted a discourse regarding the players that they were capable of doing much better than they had been doing, and there was an awareness of that," sporting director Gregory Lorenzi said in February 2024.

"We had a very difficult first half of the season before he arrived, and you see the same players from the start of last season this season too. Almost 90 per cent of the squad is the same. That shows that the quality was there, but Roy has managed to instil a discourse that has allowed the players to be more confident and show what they are capable of on the field".

Pierre Lees-Melou was the player to benefit most from Roy's revival. His brief and unsuccessful spell at Norwich City seemingly exposed the midfielder's limits, but he has had a late-career

Big win...Brest players celebrate after beating Red Bull Salzburg 4-0

Inspired appointment... Eric Roy during the Champions League draw with Bayer Leverkusen

revival. A cheat code out of possession, making the third most tackles in Ligue 1 in 2023-24, he was undoubtedly the driving force behind Brest's improbable push towards the European places.

"It's true that since Lees-Melou has been with us, he is the same player, but the environment around him perhaps suits him better and that means that he is enjoying himself more, and that shows on the pitch," said Lorenzi. "That means that his influence is felt more often than usual. He is a player that is very important in our sporting project. At Norwich, he played through the middle, like he does today, but he has benefitted from experience; he's like a fine wine."

But Lees-Melou wasn't the only player to defy expectations. The likes of Marco Bizot, Hugo Magnetti, Romain Del Castillo and Steve Mounie (now at Augsburg) will never get moves to big, fashionable clubs, but they put in big performances at Brest, all embodying this workman-like ethos that Roy has instilled at the Stade Francis-Le Ble.

It was expected that, at some point, Brest would drop off, but they just didn't, becoming increasingly expansive as the season progressed, leading to some chaotic matches: a 4-3 win over Metz, a 4-3 loss to Lyon, and a 5-4 win away to Rennes all came within the month of April as Brest went on to claim third spot come the end of the season. It was their highest-ever league finish and one that earned the club European football for the first time in their history.

It was a rise as unexpected as it was meteoric. But having qualified for the Champions League, there was no question of a change of strategy or forgetting who they are or where they came from; that was reflected in their transfer strategy as the club spent just over €12m last summer.

"I work on the principle that the transfer window is always difficult for a club like Stade Brestois where we don't have a lot of means," Lorenzi said. "We have the difficulty of being a club in the Champions League, without a European history and without having the means of a European club...we will try to keep doing what we have done for years. We mustn't lose our way," added the sporting director in an interview with *L'Equipe*.

And then there was a warning from Lorenzi: "If today we get carried away, there won't be a club and people will

Inspirational... Pierre Lees-Melou

say that we've been stupid."

This wasn't like the other stories of overachievement that we saw across the continent last season from the likes of Bayer Leverkusen in Germany, Girona in Spain, and Bologna in Italy. Yes, those teams over-performed, but Brest, with their means, had no right to achieve what they did.

The shock success, however, has allowed the club to "advance" the project in the words of Lorenzi, with Brest intent on improving their facilities, including the construction of a new stadium. Plans were recently approved for a new 15,000-seater stadium, set to open in 2027. Investing in infrastructure is a more sure-fire way of ensuring more success in the medium to long-term, rather than bringing in players that would likely depart at the end of their European adventure.

They've proven to be more than capable of competing with Europe's best despite a lack of big-name stars. By the turn of the year, they had already ensured their progression to at least the knockout phase play-offs of this year's Champions League. "Fun" has been emphasised and fearlessness has been encouraged; it has reaped results, including a draw with Bayer Leverkusen and an emphatic 4-0 win in Salzburg.

Over-achievement... Brest players during their historic 2023-24 Ligue 1 campaign

Results in Ligue 1, which remains Brest's priority, have suffered. By the end of 2024 they were in 11th place, eight points from the top four but just six above the relegation spots.

"We are aware that we will have to fight this season, perhaps against relegation. There is nothing shameful in that. It is something that has been ingrained in the club for many years," said Roy after a defeat to Monaco in November.

It has been a season of highs and lows for Brest – a microcosm of their broader history. The Pirates are mixing it with the big boys now but they remain a small club not only in France but also in Brittany, and they aren't in danger of forgetting that.

THE STADIUM

Stade Francis-Le Ble

Recently described as "medieval" by a local journalist, Brest's stadium is, by the club's own admission, decrepit. There is a certain rustic charm to the Stade Francis-Le Ble, but it did not meet the standards required to host Champions League games this season and so, in an odd turn of events, *Les Ty-Zefs* have played their European games at Ligue 2 side Guingamp.

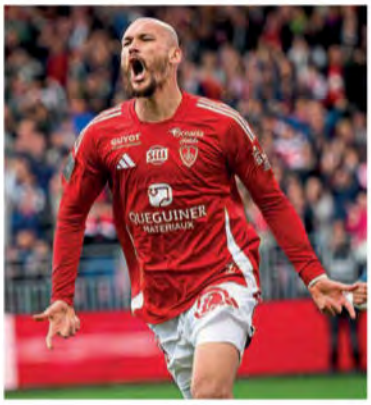
It is a relocation that tells its own story and attests to a stadium that has seen better days. And those days are numbered. With plans approved for Arkea Park, a new 15,000-seater stadium, Brest will have a new home in 2027.

Given that Brest have played at the Stade Francis-Le Ble since their creation back in 1950, it may take time for their new ground, located away from the centre of Brest, to feel like a home.

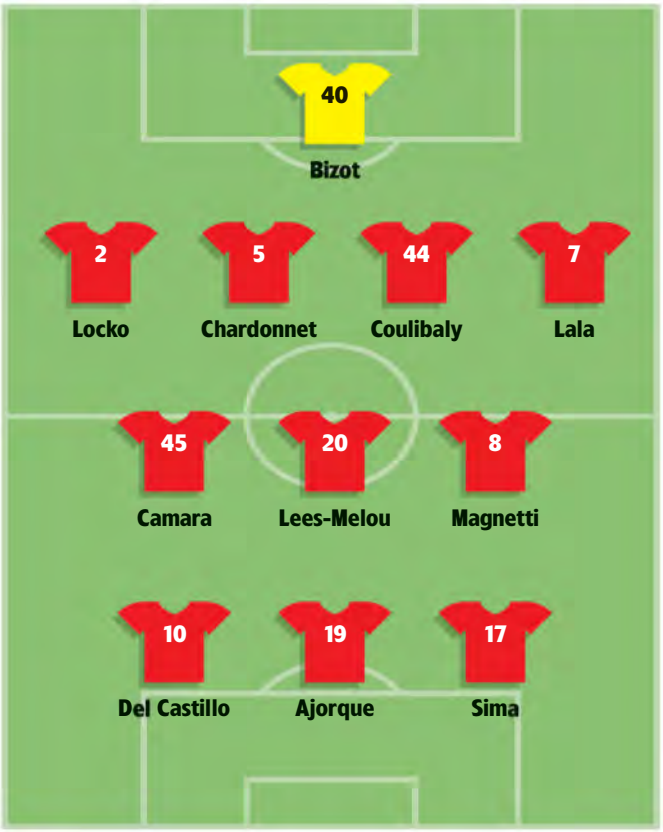
THE KIT

A canvas of sponsors, Brest's kits are always an ode to capitalism. This year is no different with no fewer than seven sponsors, including five on the front of the shirt, crammed in like Tetris blocks. This allows the club to max out their sponsorship revenue while also helping to provide exposure for local businesses, with all of their major sponsors from the Breton region.

The team's colours have been red and white ever since their first kit in 1950, though the dominant colour has alternated. Since the 2016-17 season rouge has led, although they have worn a thin white hooped number in this season's Champions League.



THE TEAM



THE TACTICS

Roy has instilled adaptability into this squad that allows them to play possession football against Ligue 1's weaker sides, while also posing real danger when operating with a more transitional style of play. Often deployed in a 4-3-3, Brest are happy to soak up pressure and remain compact in a low block before hitting long balls, either down the wings or to the focal point in the centre. It is why Steve Mounie was so important last season and why Ludovic Ajorque and Abdallah Sima, both strong in the air, both excellent in terms of hold-up play and both with the ability to bring others into play, are so important this time around. While it is reductive to say that Brest are a long-ball side, it is this style that has reaped the most rewards for the underdogs.

THE COACH

Eric ROY

"Lots of people were very critical of my choice," said sporting director Gregory Lorenzi in reference to his decision to hire Roy as head coach back in January 2023. It was clear to see why: Brest were mired in a relegation battle when they turned to a man who hadn't managed a team since 2011. Since that 18-month spell in charge of Nice, he had taken on director roles at Nice, Lens and Watford, while also doing consultancy.

Brought in from the cold, he has had a transformative effect on the Breton club, taking the Pirates from a relegation battle to Europe within just 18 months. He did so on little to no budget, instead relying on his man-management skills to extract unseen levels of performance from a group of players that many believed had passed their peak. It was one of the more surprising managerial appointments but certainly the most rewarding in Brest's history.

STRONGEST XI

Marco BIZOT
The 33-year-old Dutch keeper failed to establish himself at formative club Ajax but has done so at Brest, becoming one of Ligue 1's best shot-stoppers.

Bradley LOCKO
Locko's displays last term put him on the radar of English clubs. A driving force for Brest, he cruelly saw his season ended in August after suffering an ACL injury.

Brendan CHARDONNET
Only two players in Brest's history have played more games than the academy product turned captain. Penned a new deal last year and is aiming to top their appearance list.

Soumaila COULIBALY
Like many PSG academy products, Coulibaly had to leave Paris to make his name. He joined Dortmund in 2021, but only now with Brest is he beginning to deliver on his potential.

Kenny LALA
Having joined from Olympiacos in 2023, the journeyman Frenchman likely thought his days in European comps were numbered. A mainstay in the XI, his experience has been vital in the Champions League.

Mahdi CAMARA
It was a surprise that, when Saint-Etienne made the drop to Ligue 2 in 2022, bigger sides didn't come in for Camara. Their loss was Brest's gain and he has consistently shown that, both in Ligue 1 and in Europe.

Pierre LEES-MELOU
A midfielder whose limitations were seemingly exposed during a forgettable season at Norwich, the Frenchman is enjoying a late-career revival. The indispensable, beating heart of this Brest side.

Hugo MAGNETTI
The fact he was linked with a summer move to struggling Nantes perhaps says something about his ceiling but, a keen runner, Magnetti is an under-appreciated embodiment of Brest's ethos.

Romain DEL CASTILLO
After leaving Lyon's academy, Del Castillo worked his way back up the French pyramid. Has now found his level, providing vital attacking output to take Brest forward.

Ludovic AJORQUE
After success at Strasbourg and disappointment in Germany, Ajorque is back in France. An old-fashioned battering ram of a No.9, he has become a valuable focal point since joining in the summer on loan from Mainz.

Abdallah SIMA
This is the Senegal forward's fourth time away from Brighton, whom he joined in 2021, and his second loan spell in France. This stint is proving particularly fruitful with three goals in the Champions League in 2024.

BACK-UPS

Gregoire COUDERT
The 25-year-old goalkeeper has been pigeonholed as a back-up, playing just four Ligue 1 games.

Massadio HAIDARA
In Locko's absence, the former Newcastle man has established himself as Brest's first-choice left-back (with Lala switching to the right). Joined the club on a free transfer in the summer from Lens.

Edimilson FERNANDES
The second player signed on loan from Mainz this season, the Swiss international has filled in for Lees-Melou during his spell out injured.

Romain FAIVRE
After bouncing between Lorient and Bournemouth, who share the same owner, Faivre is back at the club where he made his name.

Mathias PEREIRA LAGE
The ex-Portugal U21 international has spent his entire career in France, playing for sides at the lower end of Ligue 1. At Brest, the winger has been a reliable squad player.

Kamory DOUMBIA
The attacking midfielder broke onto the scene with a four-goal haul v Lorient last season. His loan move from Reims to Brest was made permanent in the summer, but his output remains patchy.

Mama BALDE
The Guinea-Bissau international and Sporting youth product, who joined Brest in the summer after spells at Dijon, Troyes and Lyon, has never been a prolific striker – as he is showing once again this season.

15

OLD AND NEW

Lyon new boy Thiago Almada is an interesting mix of nostalgia and modernity

Words: Tim Vickery

Argentina's first goal as world champions was scored by a player making his living in the United States. It came against Panama in March 2023, a supposedly gentle friendly in Buenos Aires to celebrate the triumph in Qatar just over three months earlier. In the event, it was proving a frustrating evening. Panama were putting up stern resistance and the ball would not go in. The match was already in its final 15 minutes when Lionel Messi dinked a free-kick against the angle, Leandro Paredes missed his kick on the follow up, and the ball fell for Thiago Almada of Atlanta United to hook home a left-footed volley.

Almada had only made a single brief appearance during the Qatar campaign – coming on in the 84th minute of the group game against Poland. It was enough to make history: he was the first Major League Soccer player to win the World Cup.

Almada left MLS in the middle of 2024, heading south to join Botafogo of Brazil. Everyone was aware that this was a short-term move. He had flown to meet Botafogo owner John Textor on an island in the Bahamas. The deal was clear: spend a few months in Rio and then he would be on his way to Europe to join Lyon in France – another club under the control of Textor's Eagle Football Holdings.

An Argentine star in the United States, funnelled through a system of Multi-Club Ownership – all of this makes Thiago Almada a thoroughly modern football case study. But he also stands out as a mixture of the new and the old, because while there is a modern side to his rise, his is also a totally traditional tale, both in his back-story and in his style of play. As Diego Latorre, former player and the country's wisest pundit, told Almada: "You are an Argentine player par excellence, we are talking about a player with the style of the street."

He grew up in the Buenos Aires streets of Barrio Ejercito, a tough neighbourhood colloquially known as "Fort Apache," made famous in footballing terms for also being the birthplace of Carlos Tevez. There were two constants: struggle and football. From an early age, he was helping out his family hustling fruit and vegetables. Fun for the present and hope for the future came from his obvious talent for football. He was picked up by the nearby Velez Sarsfield club and climbed through their youth ranks, making his first-team debut in August 2018 at the age of 17.

The promise was immediately apparent, and over the next almost three-and-a-half years, under first Gabriel Heinze and then Mauricio Pellegrino, Almada established himself as a key part of the team and a firm idol with Velez fans.

> "You are an Argentine player par excellence"
> **Argentine pundit Diego Latorre to Almada**

He was right in the tradition of the skilful little playmaker, an attacking midfielder able to use skill and cunning to unpick opposing defences. But where should he play? Might it be easier to play him out wide? Almada is not particularly strong, nor is he blessed with extreme pace. The congested middle, the space just in front of the back four – would he be able to impose himself on the game in there? Initially, then, he was mostly used in a wide role, moving into the centre as he began to consolidate his career. And wherever he featured, he showed an eye for a pass and a capacity for combination play. At the start of 2019, he formed an interesting partnership with Julian Alvarez in the Argentina side that reached the final of the South American Under-20 Championship.

Breakthrough campaign...Almada during the 2020 Copa Sudamericana

Mentor...Gabriel Heinze gave Almada his Velez debut

Something else was attracting attention: he appeared to thrive on pressure. He comes across as a big occasion player. In September 2019, just a few months past his 18th birthday, he stepped up to take – and nervelessly convert – a penalty in a tight 2-1 win over glamour rivals River Plate. Not many teenagers are comfortable in that kind of situation.

In February of the following year, he showed that it was no fluke. Velez were up against Aucas of Ecuador in the Copa Sudamericana. They won the first leg 1-0 at home, but deep in stoppage time of the return game they were two goals down. Velez were awarded a penalty. With the away goals rule still in operation, this was a huge moment – the difference between progress or an early exit. And still two months short of turning 19, Almada came forward once more and made no mistake. This, clearly, was a career that was going places.

But, sadly, not for a while. Soon afterwards, the coronavirus pandemic struck. Football was placed on hold. Argentina was one of the last of the South American leagues to resume. Indeed, the ball was not yet rolling in the domestic league when the next round of the Sudamericana was finally played at the end of October. Almada was not fit enough to take part in the home leg against Penarol of Uruguay. In Montevideo, he came off the bench and once again scored a stoppage-time penalty that took his team through. He then scored both goals as Velez won the home leg 2-0 against Deportivo Cali of Colombia. Velez eventually fell to compatriots Lanus in the semi-finals, but Almada came out of the Sudamericana with his reputation enhanced and was named in the Team of the Tournament.

Soon afterwards came a chastening 7-1 league defeat at home to rivals Boca Juniors, with fellow Fort Apache graduate Carlos Tevez running riot. But there was better news in continental competitions. This time Velez were in the Copa Libertadores, South America's Champions League, and they were battling their way through a tough group. The crunch game came at home to LDU, or Liga of Quito of Ecuador. Velez won an early penalty – and Almada missed it. The true test, of course, is how a player responds to adversity, and, now just past his 20th birthday, Almada rose to the occasion once more, helping himself to the opening goal in a 3-1 victory that sealed the team's place in the knockout phase.

This, though, was to lead to frustration. Almada missed the second-round tie, where Velez were eliminated by Barcelona of Ecuador, because he was on duty for the national team at the Tokyo Olympics. And to make matters worse, Argentina were knocked out in the group phase without Almada being called upon.

By then his time in Argentine club football was coming to an end. MLS clubs scout extensively in South America, and in early 2022 Almada became the most expensive signing in the history of the league when Atlanta United paid $16 million to take him north.

The move was a quick success. Almada forged an instant relationship with speedy Venezuelan striker Josef Martinez, and at the end of the year he was chosen as MLS Newcomer of the Season. Martinez moved on, but 2023 also went well. This time Almada was voted the MLS Young Player of the Year (awarded to players under 22).

But during all this time, there was a nagging worry in his head. The big European clubs now like to take their South American talent as early as possible. He could have made the move in 2019, offered the chance to join Sporting on his way to Manchester City. He turned it down. He would have been a free agent, and, as he reflected afterwards: "I wanted to leave the club well, I didn't want to leave for free."

Atlanta United star ...Almada scored 23 goals in 77 MLS appearances

And so, he had extended his contract with Velez, making sure that they would receive a fee when the time came to move on. Would he pay the price for such nobility? Would this spell in the US end up hindering his chances of a move across the Atlantic? Enter John Textor, and the chance, after a few months with Botafogo, of joining Lyon. And so, Almada became the most expensive player ever signed by a Brazilian club.

This could have caused problems with the proud supporters of the Rio de Janeiro club. Were they nothing more than rented space, a mere intermediary for a player whose thoughts were elsewhere?

Right from the start, Almada made the right noises. "My head is 100 per cent here," he emphasised on his presentation in Rio. "I want to win titles, and only then start thinking about the future. The Copa Libertadores is a dream. I am going to work to establish myself as a Botafogo idol, and I have big expectations."

And he was able to back up his words on the pitch. He was stepping into a good side, well organised by Portuguese coach Artur Jorge. "There was real intensity in the training session," he recalls, "always trying to get the ball forward, always clear with us about what he wanted." And Almada, together with the other mid-season reinforcements, lifted the team up to another level. There were times during the second half of 2024 when Botafogo came across as the best team to come out of South America since the Flamengo side of 2019, and Almada was a vital part of the mix.

Decisive...Almada scores in the quarter-finals of the Libertadores

Heir to the throne...can Almada replace Lionel Messi for Argentina?

He played from the left flank. With full-back Alex Telles pushing up outside him, he was free to cut in and combine with centre-forward Igor Jesus and Venezuelan attacking midfielder Jefferson Savarino. It was a less goalscoring version of Almada than had been on show at Velez and Atlanta, but every bit as effective. The now 23-year-old Almada looked like a mature article – adept at finding space between the lines, giving passes at perfect weight and interesting angles and, once again, coming to the fore on the big occasion.

And so Botafogo ended up being much more than a trampoline to Europe; those few months in Rio were where he won his first major club silverware.

He gave some huge performances along the way. Away to Sao Paulo in the quarter-final of the Libertadores, he scored the goal that put Botafogo in the driving seat, and then, in the shootout, had to score with the crunch fifth penalty to keep his team in the competition. He did it perfectly, up in the top corner. He was immense in the away win against Palmeiras that went a long way towards clinching the league title – and then four days later, he played his part in the Libertadores final, helping set up the vital first goal against Atletico Mineiro as Botafogo shrugged off the shock of having a man sent off in the first minute.

Defeat against Pachuca in the FIFA Intercontinental Cup was a sad note on which to end. But the team was understrength and utterly exhausted, and nothing that happened that day could cast a stain on a spell where the club were crowned champions of their country and their continent.

Now, though, come the big challenges. How will he fare in Europe? The marking will be tighter, the space will be reduced and Almada will find himself forced onto his weaker left foot. Can he still tip the balance?

There will be scrutiny off the pitch, too. Lyon were hit with a transfer ban at the end of 2024 but, thanks to Textor's ownership of the two clubs involved in this deal, were able to circumvent that ban in order to sign Almada. If he proves to make the difference in their quest for Champions League qualification, the teams that miss out will not be happy.

And what of his future with Argentina? He made his senior debut shortly before the last World Cup, but was not included in the original squad for Qatar, only coming in after an injury to Joaquin Correa. Since then, he has been a bit-part player. In October, he was on target in a rout of Bolivia in World Cup qualification. But so far he has only started one game for his country – a qualifier away to Venezuela where the waterlogged pitch did not suit him and he was taken off at half-time.

With Messi in physical decline, can Almada step into the breach? He was a fine attacking leader of Argentina's Under-23 team in 2024, helping ensure that the team grabbed one of the two South American slots in the Olympics and then performing well in the Paris Games. There is, of course, a big leap between that and the senior level. The little, old-style playmaker with the modern career path will strive to find a way to make that jump.

> "The Copa Libertadores is a dream. I am going to work to establish myself as a Botafogo idol, and I have big expectations"
>
> Almada on joining Botafogo from Atlanta United

South American champion...Almada with his Libertadores winners' medal

New boy...Thiago Almada in Lyon colours ahead of the Ligue 1 game against Toulouse in January

SINGAPORE

League FOCUS

2024-25 TEAMS

- Albirex Niigata (S)
- Balestier Khalsa
- BG Tampines Rovers
- DPMM
- Geylang International
- Hougang United
- Lion City Sailors
- Tanjong Pagar United
- Young Lions

SINGAPORE PREMIER LEAGUE – A BRIEF HISTORY

For decades, Singapore competed in the Malaysian league and cup; after all, they were part of the same country until 1965. There were competitions back home but these were amateur. That changed in 1996 with the birth of the S.League. Eight clubs fought it out for the inaugural title, which was won by Geylang United in front of 30,000 spectators. Since then, the number of teams has fluctuated, going from 13 in 2012 to eight in 2020 and then back up to nine in 2023. In 2018, it was rebranded as the Singapore Premier League as it is still currently known.

THE FORMAT

In the past, there have been splits into two mini-leagues with the winners meeting in a championship play-off as well as a split in two near the end with the top group playing each other for the title and the bottom group fighting relegation. Now it is a straight league format. Last season, teams played each other three times in 24 games, but this season it is four – and it is the first cross-year format having previously been played during one calendar year. The winners go to the group stage of the AFC Champions League Two, the runners-up go to the play-offs. There is no promotion or relegation.

HONOURS BOARD

Club	*Title wins*	*Runners-up*	*Last title*
Warriors	9	4	2014
Albirex Niigata (S)	6	1	2023
BG Tampines Rovers	5	8	2013
Lion City Sailors	3	8	2021
DPMM	2	2	2019
Geyland International	2	1	2001
Etoile	1	0	2010

How are Singaporean clubs funded?
Most Singaporean teams are registered as societies by the Ministry of Home Affairs. Much of their (limited) funding comes from the Football Association of Singapore, without which they would not be able to survive.

There is an exception. In 2020, a local billionaire bought Home United and then rebranded it as Lion City Sailors. Soon, the club smashed the Singaporean transfer record by paying around £1.65m for Brazilian midfielder Diego Lopes from Portuguese club Rio Ave and invested in other foreign players with the reward of the 2021 title. Money was spent on the academy and facilities. They made waves in the early days at home and also in Asia but there are limits to what one club can achieve. A couple more would make a difference but there aren't many companies who want to invest significant sums of money into Singaporean football, and with publicly-funded clubs not looking like the answer either, this is an issue that has yet to be solved.

Why does the SPL include non-Singaporean clubs?
It is not surprising that Singapore have looked to foreign teams to bolster the league. From 2012 to 2015, Singapore and Malaysia had a team in the other's league with some success, but that was ended unilaterally by Kuala Lumpur and there are debates as to what is the best relationship to have with its larger neighbour.

There have been teams from Africa, France, China and South Korea in the SPL in the past, which did not last. Albirex Niigata Singapore, closely linked with the J. League club, have had success and have started to engage more with the local football scene, developing young Singaporean talents.

Establishing closer contacts with other leagues in Asia is important. There is little prospect of Singaporean players heading to Europe and playing at a high level in the near future, but exporting more players to leagues beyond Southeast Asia, such as the lower leagues of Japan and South Korea, is a more realistic possibility and is also a great way to increase the playing pool.

ONE TO WATCH

Raoul SUHAIMI

(Young Lions)

In 2021 Raoul Suhaimi became the SPL's youngest-ever player, making his professional debut still quite a way short of his 16th birthday. The right-back, who gets up and down the line all day long, has continued to make a name for himself for the Young Lions and, in December ahead of the 2024 ASEAN Championship, earned a first call-up to the senior national team at the still tender age of 19. With Singapore preparing for a generational shift, Suhaimi could become a mainstay of the country's defence for some time, and a move to Japan has already been mooted.

Can the SPL grow?
There are two foreign clubs in the league – Albirex Niigata Singapore, a satellite club of the Japanese club Albirex Niigata, and DPMM from Brunei. Alongside Young Lions (see below), that leaves just six local professional clubs. In the past, the quality of football has suffered after expansion but the playing pool has to be bigger – not easy when player salaries are notoriously low. Perhaps closer links could be established with semi-pro leagues such as the Singapore Football League and the Island Wide League and steps taken towards establishing promotion and relegation.

Connected to many of the issues in Singapore is the fact that there are only six million residents. There is a love of football on the island but not a huge passion for the local league in a place where there are many other ways to spend time and money. The fact that the country is basically a city in which people move around all the time does not make it easy for clubs to represent geographical districts and communities.

Bosses have tried for years to get more people to come through turnstiles but attendances remain stubbornly low – 752 last season, a drop of around 500 from a decade earlier.

What does the future hold for Young Lions?
The Young Lions were set up in 2002 as a development team, earmarked for young Singaporean players serving their compulsory two-year national service. The idea is for promising talents to not only get competitive minutes at a high level but also spend their time in an environment geared towards rookies, making their eventual step up to the senior national side smoother on and off the pitch.

The problem, however, has been results. The last time they finished in the top half of the table was in 2007 and things have become worse. They have been bottom for the last three seasons, winning just one game last time. Constant defeats don't do much for the confidence and creative freedom of young players, and so foreigners have been allowed in for the current season which, some say, defeats the point.

John Duerden

Lion City Sailors owner...Forrest Li (L) bought the club in 2020

Eye on MCOs

Clermont Foot

The French second-tier club is the centre-piece of an ambitious Multi-Club Ownership portfolio

Just four years ago, Clermont Foot 63 left behind a largely inauspicious past in the lower reaches of French football and stepped into a bright new future with promotion to Ligue 1.

Based in the city of Clermont-Ferrand, the club's origins date back to 1911 but in recent years were best known for becoming the first professional men's team to appoint a woman as manager – first hiring Portuguese coach Helena Costa, who quit after just one month, and then replacing her with Corinne Diacre who led the team for three seasons.

That, though, was in a different era under different owners. In 2019, the club was taken over by Swiss-based investment group Core

Relegated... Clermont Foot dropped out of Ligue 1 last term

MCO FILES

Club: Clermont Foot 63
Owners: Core Sports Capital (97 per cent)
MCO connections: Core Sports Capital owns a 25 per cent stake in Austrian second-tier club Austria Lustenau and a 33 per cent stake in FC Biel-Bienne 1896, who play in the Swiss third division.
Player connections: Midfielders Abdellah Baallal and Stan Berkani, and winger Ibrahim Ouattara are on loan at Austria Lustenau from Clermont Foot, while midfielder Yann Massombo, striker Loic Socka Bongue and winger Abdoulaye Coulibaly are also on loan from Clermont Foot at Biel-Bienne.

Home of Clermont Foot 63...the Stade Gabriel-Montpied

Sports Capital (CSC) as the centre of a new multi-club ownership portfolio.

CSC was formed by Ahmet Schaefer, a former associate in the office of ex-FIFA president Sepp Blatter. He left that role in 2011 to work at sports marketing agency MP & Silva, where he helped create the Arab Gulf Cup Football Federation, which united eight football federations in the Persian Gulf.

In September 2018 he formed CSC, armed with a €10 million fund and a plan to create an MCO group with a common sports philosophy. He acquired Clermont Foot 63 the following March and his impact was rapid; by 2021, the club had won promotion and reached eighth in Ligue 1.

"We did not buy a Saint-Etienne or Nice with a history, we created our own history and that's a different value proposition," says Schaefer. But maintaining a portfolio of multiple clubs while trying to develop players rather than buying success has proved a challenge.

In August 2020, CSC expanded into Scandinavia and took control of Danish second-tier club Vendsyssel. However, that project only lasted eight months, despite Schaefer ploughing 16 million Danish Krowns (£1.8m) into the club. The former chairman Jacob Anderson, who had sold the club to CSC, promptly re-bought the side amid a messy fall-out. Schaefer admits that not having a full-time representative on the ground in Denmark did not help.

While this proved chastening, CSC soon had further success after taking a stake in Austria Lustenau, who won the Austrian second tier in 2022 to return to the top flight for the first time in more than two decades.

For the third club in the CSC portfolio, Schaefer looked to Switzerland, buying a stake in third-tier side FC Biel-Bienne 1896. At the time of writing, they were enjoying the most successful season of the three sides, sitting top of the table. Meanwhile, neither Clermont Foot nor Austria Lustenau, both relegated last season, looked set to return to their respective top flights in 2025.

At Clermont, the chaos surrounding television rights has proved particularly challenging. The Ligue de Football Professionnel, which governs France's top two divisions, agreed domestic broadcast deals for the 2024-25 Ligue 1 campaign with international sports streaming service *DAZN* and Qatar-based TV giant *beIN Sports* that are a significant reduction on the previous deal.

In 2021, Clermont Foot earned €5.8m from TV rights in Ligue 2.

Clermont Foot... the club's badge overlooking the ground

ABOVE: Moved on... Muhammed Cham left Clermont for Trabzonspor last summer

LEFT: Loyal support ...Clermont fans watch their team

On their return, that figure has dropped to around €2m and Schaefer is scathing about the outcome, saying: "There is zero visibility on what's going on and that's very frustrating."

The knock-on impact of the economic crisis for Clermont Foot has been on clubs at the lower end of Ligue 1, who had been buying the players developed in France and Austria

Schaefer explains: "We have to ask, who is our clientele? In the past, we sold players to clubs like Lille or Rennes. We managed to do that in the past when the TV rights were high. But clubs that got promoted last season and signed a couple of years are €7m, €8m or €9m short. That's pure income.

"Making an exit will always be more interesting in France because of the nature of the transfer market, but we are not going to sell direct to the German Bundesliga or Paris Saint-Germain. The bottom of Ligue 1 is our clientele, and they are in turmoil. Now we are selling players like Muhammed Cham to Trabzonspor in Turkey [for a reported €4m] We have an international network that was not there before."

Clermont Foot typically buy players for up to around €500,000 and then move them on. As well as Cham, left-back Neto Borges was sold to Middlesbrough for a reported €1.5m last summer. A new training centre, recently opened at a cost of €7m, aids with the development of such players.

> Clermont Foot typically buy players for up to around €500,000 and then move them on

The club's burgeoning academy has also proved productive. Recent graduates include striker Mohamed Bayo, who joined Lille for a reported fee of €14m in 2022, defender Alidu Seidu, now at Rennes after an €11m move last January, and 20-year-old Mali right-back Cheick Oumar Konate, a first-team regular this campaign.

The next generation is showing plenty of promise too. In 2023, Clermont reached the final of France's Youth Cup the Gambardella, losing 4-2 to Monaco at the Stade de France. Four of that side are now in the first-team squad but with finances constrained and CSC not having a billionaire backer, the danger is that players leave too soon.

"If you are under pressure, you are forced to let talents go early," sighs Schaefer. "With a platform of three

New training ground... Clermont Foot's new facility is next door to the stadium

clubs, you need time to develop, and you can only do that with someone with deep pockets."

Taking advantage of CSC's MCO portfolio, then, is necessary for Clermont to progress. Movement of players had been mainly between Austria and France, but players are starting to go to Biel-Bienne and the club's likely promotion to the Swiss Challenge League will open up further responsibilities, particularly at youth level. Schaefer adds: "We have an 18-year-old in the Clermont Foot B team who is not ready to go straight into Ligue 2, so we are thinking of sending him to Switzerland."

Biel-Bienne is on the French and German borders and is less than 500km from Clermont-Ferrand, which is 700km from Lustenau, and this relatively close proximity of the three clubs makes keeping control of the portfolio easier.

The group does have links to South African academy Young Bafana and Schaefer remains interested by Denmark, which continues to attract investors. Vendsyssel were recently acquired again this time by a group of investors led by Colombian rapper Blessd.

Schaefer retains an interest but has no plans to over-stretch CSC, concluding: "I'm still very fascinated by Denmark, as the infrastructure is excellent and you can bring in non-EU players and it's a funnel for nearby countries like Finland. But three clubs is the sweet spot."

Facetoface

"Our aim has always been to develop players"

AHMET SCHAEFER

How has Core Sports Capital sought to differentiate itself from other multi-club ownership groups?
Our aim has always been to develop players and not buy a trophy asset. My responsibility has always been to keep the volatility index as low as possible. I'd rather be boring, unfashionable and unsexy. When you sit round a table with billionaires and private equity, it's already a challenge.

A wave of American investors are buying clubs in Europe. How is their approach different to a European MCO group?
Our approach was very steady in the transition phase [of buying a club]. We took ten months to come into Clermont Foot. The owner could have got money, but he wanted to be sure of our approach. The American way is to talk a lot. Ours is to get our house in order first and not to go and bang on people's heads.

If you are not football savvy and don't know the price and don't care about the city and the fans, you must believe in the management of the club you are buying.

What do you think their objective is?
These funds have to make a return for their investors, or they would not lend them money in the first place, so they have to make money and flip the asset.

How do you expect MCO to evolve?
We will see more connections in the spider's web as its becoming an asset class that is bringing returns that will be accelerated with the World Cup in the USA next year and then in Saudi Arabia. It will continue but the question is at what speed and what objective.

Would you consider selling CSC?
Opening up to new guys with deeper pockets, why not? But why would I let go completely? I am still a young guy.

RIGHT TO DREAM: PART TWO

In September 2021, *World Soccer* examined the work of the Right to Dream academy in Ghana and Denmark. Now, more than three years on, the project has expanded even further…

Words: Neel Shelat

Founded by Manchester United scout Tom Vernon as an academy in Ghana in 1999, Right to Dream has long maintained a great reputation in the world of football.

Initially operating out of Vernon's own house before eventually expanding to a proper campus, the academy's acquisition of Danish club FC Nordsjaelland in 2015 was the first vital step in providing a pathway into professional first-team football for their graduates. Subsequent success stories – West Ham United star Mohammed Kudus, Brentford schemer Mikkel Damsgaard and Brighton winger Simon Adingra are among their most notable alumni – helped put them on the global map, but a takeover by Egyptian billionaire Mohamed Mansour in 2021 allowed Right to Dream to expand even further.

Through Mansour, a presence in Egypt was established in the shape of another academy and the takeover of a small lower-league club by the name of Tutankhamun FC. According to Mohammed Wasfy, the CEO of Right to Dream Egypt, six months of on-ground research went in before the deal's completion in order to understand whether it would be possible to replicate the Right to Dream model in the country. That research, and the subsequent results, suggested that it absolutely was possible.

Just as in Ghana, where Right to Dream scouts go all over the country and set up events to identify young talents, the academy has 15 regional organisers in Egypt who cover most of the country. Yet their scope goes beyond football, as Wasfy explains: "What we do in Right to Dream is two things: talent identification and development. And it's the holistic development: football, education and character."

These are the criteria that Right to Dream scouts look for, and what the academies look to further nurture once the students have been selected.

Students are hosted in full-scholarship residential academies

Notable alumnus...Right to Dream graduate Ibrahim Osman celebrates scoring for Nordsjaelland
Credit: FC Nordsjaelland

furthering their education until the age of 15 or 16, when they have two pathways to choose from: the pro football pathway, for which they move to Right to Dream's International Academy to take their footballing development up a notch, or the educational pathway which sees them move to one of Right to Dream's partner boarding schools in the United States before pursuing higher education.

Right to Dream's group head of football, Mads Davidsen, believes that this focus on youth development is the key to their success.

"We see ourselves as a community of academies and clubs. I would say we are a multi-academy ownership because we are the only organisation in the world that has more academies than clubs," says Davidsen. "That's a very unique part of the strategy that we build from the bottom and up."

Through such an approach, the main upside of owning multiple clubs is that academy graduates have multiple avenues to break through at the senior level. Yet Right to Dream also aim to maintain a degree of uniformity, with a detailed style of play that is implemented at all their clubs.

"The style of play is not necessarily designed to win games; it's designed to develop players for the highest level," Davidsen explains. "That's the ultimate aim. And then, of course, if you do that, you're also going to win a lot of games."

Indeed, Right to Dream's Egyptian club have been reaping the rewards of this approach already. Recently renamed FC Masar (which literally translates to "pathways" in Arabic), their men's team has had back-to-back promotions to rise to the national third tier. The women's team has made all the headlines so far though, swiftly establishing themselves as a force to be reckoned with on the continental stage.

Where it all began ...players at the academy in Ghana

> "I would say we are a multi-academy ownership because we are the only organisation in the world that has more academies than clubs"
>
> **Right to Dream's group head of football Mads Davidsen**

Mariam Abouhegazy, who heads the women and girls' division of Right to Dream Egypt, says that their goal from day one was to win the CAF Women's Champions League.

When they took over the club, FC Masar's women were in the second tier and in need of a lot of changes. They were fortuitously handed a ticket to the top flight after one of the Women's Premier League clubs withdrew, but still decided to overhaul the squad, coaching staff and playing approach.

What followed was instant success. They won the cup in their very first season under Right to Dream's ownership and went on to complete the domestic double the following year, earning a spot in the 2024 CAF Women's Champions League qualifiers. After navigating a tough campaign, they made it to the tournament proper and took the competition by storm. A debut win over defending champions Mamelodi Sundowns was a statement of intent, which they followed up by qualifying for the semi-finals. A last-minute defeat to would-be champions AS FAR of Morocco saw their dreams of the trophy dashed, but they still secured an impressive bronze medal by defeating Edo Queens of Nigeria in the third-place play-off.

"We did really well in the CAF Women's Champions League," says Abouhegazy. "Our players are on the radar of a lot of clubs and I think it just shows that when a proper plan is put in place, [when] there's a lot of focus on

Right to Dream... the stunning new academy in Egypt

developing the girls in a holistic way and giving them everything that they need to succeed, results come maybe even sooner than we anticipate.

"I think now by reaching the Champions League we're three years ahead in our seven-year strategy."

While FC Masar were accelerating on the highway to success in 2023, Right to Dream secured their third club in the shape of Major League Soccer expansion outfit San Diego FC, who will join the league for the 2025 campaign. They have also set about establishing an academy in the city, which will run on the same principles and methodology, but things might have to start a little differently for the club.

Success story... FC Masar women's team are thriving

Images credit: Right to Dream Academy

"There's no doubt that starting a football club from scratch and basically in 90 days having to go into playing the first league game in MLS is a different challenge, which requires a different strategy," admits Davidsen. "So, in the short term, you'll probably see a slightly older San Diego squad than you would see in Nordsjaelland. But over time, the strategy is to do the same.

"We believe that we can compete over time in MLS with a Right to Dream strategy and with a focus on getting homegrown players."

The Right to Dream connection came in handy for San Diego as the club's hierarchy began piecing together their squad last year. While waiting for the club's inaugural season to begin, two of the new recruits, Alex Mighten and Duran Ferree, spent the second half of 2024 on loan at Nordsjaelland, while two others, Danes Jeppe Tverskov and Marcus Ingvartsen, were signed directly from the Danish club. Another Dane, Anders Dreyer, recruited from Belgian side Anderlecht, will also be familiar to the owners, having scored three goals against Nordsjaelland during his time with Midtjylland. Another of the new signings, 31-year-old Ghanaian forward Emmanuel Boateng, is a Right to Dream success story having joined the academy at the age of 12. At 15, he moved to a boarding school in the US and went on to attend the University of California, and has played in MLS since 2016 with the likes of LA Galaxy, D.C. United, Columbus Crew and New England Revolution.

More signings are likely to follow – some in line with the usual Right to Dream strategy, and some with the more short-term focus that Davidsen hinted at. So far, the most high-profile recruit has been Mexico international Hirving Lozano – perhaps an attempt to emulate the success that LAFC had when they made another Mexican, Carlos Vela, their first signing upon joining MLS in 2017 – although they also made headlines when Juan Mata joined the club's ownership group with a minority stake. Their coaching staff, led by Mikey Varas, a former assistant for the United States men's national team who is undertaking his first senior management role, certainly seems to be in line with their long-term objectives.

All the while, the Ghana Academy where it all started remains the heart of Right to Dream's operations. CEO Alex Asiedu revealed that they will soon begin work to expand their campus. Encapsulating their approach, he says: "Our board chair, Charles Vernon, has an expression that I like. He says: 'Ultimately, it's all about the kids.' So, whatever it is, everything that we are geared towards is creating an environment that will help them get where they want to get to."

San Diego...a visual of the new Right to Dream academy in the United States

FISHING FOR SUCCESS

Ambitious young English coach Charlie Trout has high hopes for the Puerto Rico national team

Words: Sean Cole

In the summer of 2007, Charlie Trout took a bold step, leaving behind his family and football club for a fresh start on the other side of the world. His playing ambitions were fading and he wanted to explore new possibilities. Moving to Chicago on a college scholarship sent his life and career down a very different path.

Remarkably, Trout's still there 18 years later, now with a wife, three young children and a wealth of coaching experience. At the age of 39, he manages the Puerto Rico men's national team, who are ranked 157th in the world. Nobody could have predicted his trajectory so far, or where it might take him from here.

Trout grew up on the Clifton council estate in Nottingham. He inherited a love of football, and Nottingham Forest, from his dad. Surrounded by kids of a similar age, he would play for hours on end at the local park. At the age of 11, while representing Nottinghamshire Boys, he was spotted by Leeds United and recruited for their youth system.

Accustomed to being one of the best, he lost his spark at Leeds so returned to playing for fun and was picked up by Lincoln City, where he signed as an apprentice. He went on to train regularly with the first team, and was even given a squad number, but never made a competitive appearance. At 19, he was released and signed for Gainsborough Trinity of the Conference North.

"It's a grind. I was working different jobs, but football has been a big part of my life, and I've just always loved it," says Trout. "You see how important it is to local people. The buzz of getting up on a Saturday and going to play. Whether you're playing in front of 50 people or 10,000, it doesn't matter. Non-League was good for me. It made me grow up."

Trout saw Gainsborough as a possible route back into the Football League until he tore his hamstring against Kettering Town, who were then managed by Paul Gascoigne, in an FA Trophy tie. He was out of action for eight months and didn't feel the same when he returned. Repeated injuries prompted Trout to abandon his dream of making it as a professional in England.

He had turned down the chance to play in America before, but didn't hesitate in taking it this time. After impressing in a trial game, Trout enrolled at the University of Illinois Chicago. Living as a college freshman in a huge city nearly 4,000 miles away was daunting and he struggled to adapt.

Trout was even planning to stay home when he returned for his first Christmas break. But after a few days back in Nottingham, he realised that leaving Chicago would be a mistake and returned there with renewed conviction. Despite the many challenges involved, including the harsh weather, Trout sees this decision as the best he ever made.

"The winter's brutal – it's absolutely freezing until March – but it's an amazing city with a huge skyline. There's a lot of diversity. I've met people from all over the world that live in Chicago and it really opens your mind. I think it's made me a better person," he says.

Trout first discovered a passion for coaching while helping out the younger age groups at Lincoln during his apprenticeship. This came to the fore when he moved abroad and became involved with an inner-city programme. His knowledge and enthusiasm shone through.

"That's where things snowballed. The team I was coaching was doing really well, and Chicago Fire were looking at a lot of those players. They decided to take eight or nine of this one team that I was coaching over to the academy, as well as myself. So that's where I went when I finished my degree."

Helping players improve gives Trout immense satisfaction. Although his coaching has taken various forms over the years, he has specialised in working with young, aspiring footballers, which has given him a different perspective and skillset. He sees teaching as his biggest strength.

Problem-solving is another source of fascination. "I've always loved the intricacies of the game," says Trout. "Whatever I'm playing, whether it's football, chess, pool or anything, I always feel as though I can find a tactical way to beat anyone. That's the way my brain works."

With his family settled in Chicago, Trout's career reached a crossroads during the COVID-19 pandemic. He turned down offers to move and take up roles at other clubs, preferring to start his own coaching business. This gave Trout more independence and control of his own schedule. The

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HEAD COACH

benefits of this new arrangement soon became clear.

In 2021, Dave Sarachan, a former interim manager of the United States national team, took charge of Puerto Rico and asked Trout to help out with the Under-20s side. It was a leap into the unknown. When Sarachan stepped away, Trout assumed that his involvement would end. Instead, he was offered the top job.

"It was very strange. It was kind of an out-of-body experience," he says of being offered the job. "We're not talking Brazil or Argentina, but it was exciting because I'd always dreamt of an opportunity to present my vision of football and there's no better stage to do that.

"It was a whirlwind. It came totally out of the blue. I probably didn't feel as though I was ready, but it was an opportunity I couldn't really turn down. I think you only get ready when you're thrown into something like that, but I'd been preparing for it. I had more than 20 years of coaching experience under my belt."

World Cup dreams... Puerto Rico supporters inside the Juan Ramon Loubriel Stadium in Bayamon

A small island in the Caribbean, previously controlled by Spain, Puerto Rico has been an American territory since 1898. The national team, nicknamed the Blue Hurricane, have long struggled due to a lack of resources and playing talent. Although significant improvements have been made in recent years, they have never qualified for the CONCACAF Gold Cup, let alone the World Cup.

An ambitious Trout hopes to change that, while embracing Puerto Rico's unique characteristics. "I absolutely love it – the people, the culture, the traditions, the music, the food," he says. "It has an island vibe – Caribbean but with Latin and Spanish heritage. It's a hard-working, blue-collar country, which resonates with me because

Young, aspiring footballers...Puerto Rico players celebrate during last year's 8-0 victory over Anguilla

of my background. It's a special place."

He recognises something of himself in his youthful team, too – full of slight, technical players who are eager to learn. For the last camp in November, where they beat Aruba 5-1 before losing 3-0 to Haiti, the Puerto Rico squad had an average age of just 21. Several were teenagers. Almost all were US-based, with some still at college and lacking any professional experience.

"It's an extremely young group, but there's a bright future for them. That was another reason why I felt I was the right person for the job. Puerto Rico has huge potential. The experience of playing international games at the age of 17, 18, 19 is only going to benefit them later on."

The Blue Hurricane have few players in their prime, or beyond, because most Puerto Ricans traditionally step away from football in their mid-20s to take on more secure work. The hope is that Trout's squad can grow together and set a precedent. They have fared well so far, winning ten of the 20 games since he was appointed in March 2023, and climbing 13 places in the world rankings.

June's clash with Suriname could be a milestone moment. Puerto Rico are second in their World Cup qualifying second round group after holding El Salvador to a goalless draw and thrashing Anguilla 8-0. A positive result could help them make history and move a step closer to potentially competing in next summer's tournament.

"If we can win, or even get a tie, we stand an amazing chance of getting through to the final round of World Cup qualifiers, which will be the first time that Puerto Rico has ever got that far. That would get us into the final 12, and up to five teams can make the World Cup from that point," says Trout, who is conscious of the challenge his side face.

> "As crazy as it sounds, Puerto Rico will aim to get to a World Cup. That's why we're in football, to push the boundaries"

"Suriname are on an upward trajectory. They made the quarter-finals of the Nations League. They've got players in top leagues in Europe, like the Eredivisie and La Liga, and they're older. They're men. For a young team to go there, in a hostile environment, and get a result against that level of opponent would be a phenomenal achievement, but we believe we can do it."

Inspired by Marcelo Bielsa and Pep Guardiola, Trout has a bold philosophy. While preferring to dominate the ball, he recognises the value of pragmatism. "We're looking long-term with Puerto Rico. But I've got to think short term as well, because in football you're only three games away from getting sacked. You have to adapt your true beliefs at times to give yourself a chance to stay in the job, so eventually you get to that point where you can showcase what your football is all about."

In the meantime, Trout's squad continues to evolve. Injuries, like losing captain Juan O'Neill to a torn ACL against El Salvador, stymied their early progress, and experienced defender Zarek Valentin has now retired. Puerto Rico finished second in their Nations League B group, missing out on the preliminary round of the Gold Cup.

"I'll always be critical of my performance because I want to win every game. I want to keep pushing, but we have to be realistic. The one thing I'll always do is keep working, and I won't stop until we get where we need to go. I'm pleased with what I've done, but I'm certainly not content."

That hunger and ambition is obvious, both in Trout's current role and beyond. "As crazy as it sounds, Puerto Rico will aim to get to a World Cup. That's why we're in football, to push the boundaries. If that wasn't the ultimate goal, then it would be pointless being here. I truly believe they can, but it's a journey. It doesn't just happen overnight," he says.

Eager to eventually work at the highest level, Trout found added motivation in the outcome of the Euro 2024 final. "I was in a bar in Chicago watching it with all the other English lads. We were distraught that they couldn't get across the line. But then I step away and a couple of days later I'm thinking: 'Maybe I'm the guy that can do that for England one day.' Obviously, that's the loftiest dream, but that's the kind of self-belief I have. I want to be the best at anything I do."

World Cup qualifying... Trout (R) greets David Doniga, the manager of El Salvador

ANDRII SHEVCHENKO

"Football has the power to heal a war-torn country"

The Ukraine legend, now in his role as president of the Ukrainian FA, discusses how the country is using football as a symbol of unity and hope amid the ongoing devastating effects of war

You returned to Ukraine and were elected president of the Ukrainian Football Association in January 2024 while the war was ongoing. What were your thoughts at that time?
Above all, I believe that football has the power to heal a war-torn country. This belief motivated me, knowing that despite all the difficulties, Ukrainian football will emerge stronger and more united than ever.

You were a legendary footballer, then a manager – how difficult has it been for you to adapt to this new role?
To be honest, this transition required me to adapt to new responsibilities and a broader perspective. My passion for football and the desire to help my country in extremely difficult times gave me a special drive.

How much damage has the war caused to sports facilities in Ukraine?
It's not easy to talk about this, but over 500 sports infrastructure facilities have been damaged by shelling: 77 stadiums, 102 sports bases and schools, and 174 sports halls. In some regions of Ukraine, over 60 per cent of sports infrastructure has been wiped out. However, the most important loss is people. Ukraine has lost over 200 members of the football community and thousands of football fans. Sports facilities can be rebuilt, but lives cannot be restored. This is something that every Ukrainian will remember.

How has Ukrainian football managed to survive amid martial law in the country, where domestic matches are often interrupted due to air raids?
All this has happened thanks to the dedication and professionalism of our players, coaches and everyone involved. They are the ones to thank for that. We have been able to maintain the entire competitive cycle both at the top level and among youth and children's teams. And this is during conditions of great restrictions. Due to security issues, the number of spectators at the stadiums is limited but football in Ukraine remains a symbol of unity and hope.

What can be done to avoid losing a whole generation of young players who have been forced to leave Ukraine because of the war?
War destroys everything, including human relationships. But we must fight for this young generation. It is important to maintain an emotional connection with Ukraine, and football is one such connector, no matter the distance. The best recent examples are Zach Baumann [Manchester United] and Andre Vakuliuk [Benfica] who both joined the Ukraine Under-17 team. Zach was born in the UK and Andre in Portugal, however this has not stopped them from joining Ukraine.

Your son, following in the footsteps of the children of your former Milan team-mates Paolo Maldini and George Weah, is a football player and has already made his debut for Ukraine's Under-19s...
Kristian chose this path himself. It won't be easy, just like for other sons of famous players. There is simply no escape from psychological pressure. Of course, I am proud that he became part of Ukraine's Under-19s and debuted as No.7! It was an important experience for him and an incredibly emotional moment for me.

Turning to the senior national team, what are your thoughts on Ukraine's 2026 World Cup qualifying draw?
The group in which, apart from us, France or Croatia, as well as Iceland and Azerbaijan looks balanced. In principle, qualifying for a major tournament is always a challenge. It will be a good opportunity for our players to show their best skills.

During the broadcast of the draw, there was an incident when Crimea was not displayed on the map of Ukraine. Such an oversight by FIFA caused a great international outcry...
Yes, of course, this is absolutely unacceptable. We sent an official letter to FIFA requesting an explanation. We clearly stated that such mistakes could damage our country's image and contradicted FIFA's consistent public stance of respecting Ukraine's territorial integrity. FIFA acknowledged their error and apologised for it. They assured us that the image had been removed from circulation and that steps would be taken to prevent such situations in the future.

You are doing a lot to make the world aware of the war and its devastating impact on Ukraine. What do you consider the most important aspect of this?
For me, the most important thing is to convey the truth about what is happening in Ukraine to the world. To remind everyone that a brutal and unjust war is being waged against my people, taking lives, destroying cities and infrastructure, and leaving deep scars in the hearts of Ukrainians.

In 2024, you were inducted into the Italian Football Hall of Fame, and then into Milan's one too with the club celebrating its 125th anniversary. What do you remember from that period of your glorious career?
Italy is the country in which I spent the most successful period of my club career. These are incredibly vivid memories and emotions that I experienced while playing for AC Milan. They are similar to the feelings I felt as a child and which I shared during the induction ceremony. Italian football was almost a religion for me. I love Italy with all my heart.

Twenty one years ago you won the Ballon d'Or. Is there a chance that a Ukrainian player can emulate your success one day?
I believe that among Ukrainian players currently competing in Europe's top leagues, there are those with the potential to reach great heights and even surpass my achievements. You just have to believe in your own strength and success will surely come.

Interview by Oleg Zadernovsky

NDUBUISI EGBO

"I'm dreaming of being the coach that will win the World Cup with an African country"

The Nigerian talks about breaking new ground as a title-winning coach in Europe, his managerial aspirations, and the coaching opportunities available for African managers on the continent

How did your coaching career in Albania begin?
Even before I ended my career, I'd already started with the goalkeeping coaching licence. When I was playing, a lot of coaches saw that in me and many of them told me: "You are going to be a good coach in the future," because of the way they saw that I read the game. So that was in my mind early, that when I finished my playing career, I was going to go into coaching.

Was it going to be restricted to just goalkeeping in those initial stages?
No, no, I wanted to be more than only a goalkeeping coach, I wanted to get all the coaching licences available. And I used my team, FK Bylis, to do all of that. I started with the goalkeeper licence, the B licence, the A licence, and then the UEFA Pro licence. All through the Albanian FA.

That could not have been easy for you as a foreigner...
No, it was, because I also speak the language, and I was playing here, I already had a permanent resident permit and then I became a citizen and got my passport in 2013. I've been here a long time, 23 years now, and obviously settled with my family.

How did your coaching career evolve?
I started in 2011 as a goalkeeper coach, and then from 2013 as assistant coach with FK Bylis. When we started the 2013-14 season the head coach left, and the club president had the confidence to give me the job. That was my first run as a coach in the Super League. After that, I joined FK Tirana as goalkeeper coach and assistant coach in 2014.

Was that a step up or down?
I accepted to be goalkeeper coach again because it was a bigger team than my former club and it fitted in with my aspirations. That's why I stayed there for quite a long time before accepting to be the head coach. I was offered the job about three times but I refused, because I know how big Tirana are as a team. I was caretaker coach several times but it was only in 2019 that I accepted the head coach role, when I finally believed it was the right time. I took my time to learn a lot from the men who coached Tirana, and also the experiences I had with my coaches in Nigeria. I saw a lot of the mistakes, the positives and the negatives, and from there I created my own philosophy of approach and methodology of work and that helped me a lot. And also knowing the language, being able to communicate with my players, not needing a translator, made it much easier for me to manage.

What sort of coach are you? What outlook on the game do you have?
When anyone asks me this question, I always talk of Jose Mourinho as one of my ideal coaches to emulate. It doesn't matter what players I have, I always try to get the maximum from them. If I have a good team, then I take the maximum. If I have an average team, I'll use them to achieve something that nobody expected could happen.

What was your secret to winning the league title in Albania?
I tried to put into practice my own philosophy, which for me is not only about the strategy or about the system of play but how to manage the team. If you can manage the team psychologically and be able to get the maximum from them, for every player to give his life for you in the game, then you have a winning team.

Could you see the title coming?
My first game in charge was against Partizani, which is the biggest derby in the country, and we had not won for six years. I had a premonition that we were going to win the game, and when we did it was the catalyst that propelled us. We went 16 games unbeaten, jumping from eighth out of ten teams and hauling in a 12-point deficit. It was like we came back from the dead to be alive again.

What was the reaction in Albania to you as an African achieving the feat?
Even now, many people, and especially

the fans of other teams, ask me: "How did you do that?" because it was a surprise. There are those fans today who still call me Tirana coach. I always tell them I'm a former coach. "No, you are coach of Tirana for the rest of your life," they tell me.

When did you realise, or when was it pointed out to you, what you achieved in terms of African football? There have been very few African coaches in Europe, never mind one winning a league...
I never thought about that until towards the end of that season, when we were almost sure mathematically that we were going to win the league. And then people started to call me from Nigeria and said: "Do you know that you're going to be the first African to win a league in Europe?" But in my work, I don't look at the accolades. I like to let my work speak for itself.

Do you think African coaches can start to set their sights on getting jobs in Europe?
I will only say to them the sky is the limit, because when we limit ourselves, you are effectively bringing yourself down. I'm the type that believes that everything is possible in life, if you fight. If such a thing can happen with me, that I came to Europe, played in Europe, started coaching in Europe and won the league, then there is nothing that any African coach cannot achieve, and we are seeing it now. I believe one day we will see African coaches in the Champions League and we'll see African coaches winning the World Cup with their nation.

Do African coaches get enough opportunities back home?
What are we doing in the African continent to support coaches who are from Africa, coaching in national teams? Why don't we Africans protect our own? The last Cup of Nations have all been won by African coaches, who have grown up there, know the mentality, the character, the mindset that the team has or needs to have. If we as Africans don't think of supporting our own or giving our own those opportunities and support, then where are we going? And when an African coach does get a national team job, he's far more likely to get the sack after one or two losses than a foreign coach would. The federations have to give African coaches more chance and with full support, it shouldn't matter if he fails in the beginning because he's going to also grow. He's going to make it if he has the support and the confidence although a lot of local coaches get a lot of interference, particularly in squad selection.

What would you still like to achieve?
I believe I've not achieved anything yet. I'm aiming for bigger things to happen, I'm dreaming of winning the Champions League. I'm dreaming of being the coach that will win the World Cup with an African country.

Interview by Mark Gleeson

CALUM HALL

"I was stuck in a welding bay for six hours. Fast-forward a year, I'm swapping shirts with Jordi Alba"

Less than two years ago, Calum Hall was playing part-time football in the Scottish Lowland League and working on a building site. Now he's a star of the Hong Kong Premier League and has lined up against some of football's biggest names…

As a teenager you were released by Hibernian and then spent five years playing in the lower reaches of Scottish football for Edinburgh City and Gala Fairydean Rovers. Tell us a little bit about those early years...

When I got released the only option was to go to Edinburgh City, who had just spent one year in League Two. They signed me on a contract on top of a green wheelie bin in the changing room – not how you imagine your first senior contract, but that was part of getting exposed to men's football, thrown in at the deep end.

I wasn't quite ready for [men's football], but I just had to deal with it. It's very physical, not very pretty. You're travelling three or four hours up to places like Elgin in the north of Scotland, playing on pitches that, by Christmas time, there's absolutely no way you'll see a blade of grass.

Once you get into that part-time environment in Scottish football, it's quite hard to get yourself back out. It's definitely not the most glamorous stage for football.

What were you doing alongside your early football career?

My first year at Edinburgh City I was still in school. Once I finished sixth form, I had no idea what I was going to do. You're always, at the back of your mind, thinking: "It'd be great if a full-time opportunity came up," but nothing was really going to come up, and I was being pretty real with that.

I did an apprenticeship in heating engineering, so it was part-time football while working on building sites. I'd never even thought about working on a building site before, but I thought: "I need something that can give me a Plan B."

Some days were tough. Getting up at 5.30am, finishing work at 4pm in the afternoon and going straight to training, not getting home until about 11pm, and then doing it all over the next day. That taught me a lot. From what I know now, I appreciate what being a football player is, how much time you have, how lucky you are. I really hope one day I never have to go back to that.

So how did the move to Hong Kong Premier League side Eastern come about in 2023?

Scottish football is a village, everybody knows everybody through someone. I knew a coach at Gala, Eddie Mangan. The season before I arrived there, he moved to Sri Lanka.

When I came into my last six months at Gala, I got a phone call from Eddie, and he said: "I'm now in Hong Kong with a team in the Hong Kong Premier League. We're looking to bring in a right-back and you can probably fit the profile."

He phoned me in February and I flew out in June. I came out on a trial basis originally, but not a lot of thought went into what to do. When the opportunity was concrete and everything had been sorted, I was like: "I've got to go for this." I scored with the first touch of my trial game, and I effectively got signed after that.

How does the standard of football compare to your time in Scotland?

Really good. I would compare it to top-end Championship in Scotland, lower Premiership. That's the top three or four teams definitely, like Eastern, Lee Man, Kitchee – these teams are strong. Lee Man and Kitchee especially have the biggest budgets by far, so they can attract a lot of players from Europe or big clubs in Asia. It's a good standard. Everybody's full-time, so everyone's fitness levels are a lot higher. You're training every day, so it's definitely a massive step up from what I've been used to.

And what about the style of football?

Everyone does try to play. Compared to Scottish football, where it's extremely fast-paced, everything's 100 miles an hour and you don't get any time on the ball – you get a bit more time here because of the heat and the humidity, which slows people down. But there's a lot more thought put into it, a lot more tactical stuff, you've got a lot more time to work on the training pitch, so you have to be more tactically aware and know how to break down other teams.

During your first season in Asia, you were selected to play in a Hong Kong XI against Inter Miami. What was that like?

It was crazy. I knew that I might have been considered, but I never really thought I was going to be picked. We had a game for Eastern the week before, my manager pulled me to ➤

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the side of the changing room to say I'd been picked, and I was in shock. All I could think about for that whole game was: "Wow, I'm going to be playing in front of 50,000 people next week." And you're not just playing against anybody, you're playing against some of the best ever in football.

Exactly a year from the day that we played Inter Miami, I was in college. I was stuck in a welding bay for six hours, and fast-forward a year I'm swapping shirts with Jordi Alba. It was such a pinch-me moment.

You came on for the second half. Sergio Busquets and Jordi Alba played, but Lionel Messi and Luis Suarez stayed on the bench...

There were rumours at half-time and before the game that Messi was carrying an injury, so he just sat on the bench. So, of course, that was a little bit disappointing as the whole event was about him. You can imagine, all the people were going crazy that they weren't getting to see Messi and Suarez, but Busquets and Alba came on.

I knew that this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, so I was trying to enjoy it as much as possible. I managed to get forward, put a few crosses in. But the left-winger Robert Taylor, a Finland International, he's extremely good, so I was just trying to not be too humiliated by him. And then you've got Jordi Alba overlapping, underlapping – they're four or five steps ahead before you can even think. It was a tough test, but I wasn't worried about the scoreline at the end of the game.

I think the crowd was just shy of 50,000, so by far the biggest I'd ever played in front of. I think I was playing in front of 150 people the year before away at Gretna or somewhere like that, so it was a huge contrast.

Did you get any souvenirs from the game?

In the tunnel I managed to swap shirts with Alba, so that was a nice moment. I actually asked him on the pitch, they scored their third or fourth goal and he was involved in it, and as he was running past me I just said: "Jordi!" as if I knew him, as if he's a mate.

He was polite, he understood what it meant to guys like us playing against him. He asked for my shirt but this was a once-in-a-lifetime experience for me, so I wanted to keep everything.

Trip to Sydney...Hall in AFC Champions League Two action

Star-studded substitutes' bench...(from left to right) Jordi Alba, Luis Suarez, Lionel Messi and Sergio Busquets all watch on from the sidelines during Inter Miami's friendly against a Hong Kong XI in February 2024

A few months later, you won the Hong Kong FA Cup. Was winning trophies a big part of your reason for moving?

Not really. I knew that Eastern were a strong side in Hong Kong, but it's not like their objective at the start of the year is to go and win things – it's about developing players. If they can get a player to go to a better Asian league, that's their way of seeing success. They're not splashing money, signing players from all over to win things. So when I came over, I just knew that it was going to be an opportunity to showcase the best of myself.

But the FA Cup final was an incredible day. Nobody had any belief in us, but we knew within our changing room what we could achieve because we're a really strong team. To win something in your first year of professional football is an amazing feeling.

Winning that competition then took you into the newly formed AFC Champions League Two...

We all watched the draw together: Sydney, Sanfrecce Hiroshima and Kaya-Iloilo. A couple of days later Douglas Costa signed for Sydney. I had a little hamstring tear at the start of the season and I missed the first two league games, so my first start of the season was against Douglas Costa in Sydney.

That was an incredible experience again, and not just Douglas Costa. I used to watch

Tough opponent ...Hall up against Sydney FC winger Douglas Costa

"Douglas Costa was good, but I don't think he got out of second gear"

a lot of A-League football when I was back home. I'd wake up early Saturday morning and it would be on *BT Sport*, so I used to keep tabs on a lot of A-League football. That was a really nice experience to go there and get a taste of it.

Is Douglas Costa the best player you've played directly up against?
On paper, yes. Costa was good, but I don't think he got out of second gear, to be honest. The first game was his debut and he had a lot of flicks and tricks. But I don't think against me or any of us he really had to get out of second gear.

But I have to say the Hiroshima team is incredible. Australian football is strong, definitely, but I don't think it's anywhere near the level of Japanese football. I read that the J. League is ranked higher than the Eredivisie in the Netherlands, so these guys are a top European standard, incredible technically, streets ahead of most teams in Asia. They were just ruthless. They don't take any prisoners, they are just constant, 100 miles an hour, and that was a real eye opener.

I think Japanese football is only going to get stronger and you're going see a lot more Japanese players in the Premier League and the top divisions in Europe.

You finished bottom of the group with three points. Was that a disappointment?
We went into the competition thinking we'd probably not even get one point. The first game away to Sydney, there was a moment where it was still 0-0 and we missed two one-on-ones. You could say things might have changed if we scored them [the game finished 5-0 to Sydney].

We thought we'd have a chance in the return game. Hong Kong grass is different, it's like a straw, it's not quite like your thin blades of grass that they're used to, so we thought they might not like that as much when they came here, but they beat us 4-1.

We never went into the competition with any expectation. It was all just experience and hoping one day you can get the chance to get these opportunities again.

You did get a famous win in the Philippines though, beating Kaya-Iloilo 2-1 away...
That was a really difficult place to go. At the time, Hong Kong was starting to get a bit cooler, the humidity wasn't as much. But their pitch was a really dry, hard Astroturf pitch, and the humidity there was still really strong. So that was probably one of the toughest games we had in the competition.

We were supposed to play on the Thursday night, but the game got called off. It was a typhoon, so we had to stay an extra night and played on the Friday at midday, and then flew straight after the game. After everything we'd been through over there, to come away with three points was incredible.

After the game, someone contacted me on Twitter to tell me that I was the first Scottish player to win in an AFC competition. So that was like: "Wow, I can't believe it's me that's done that."

Having tasted some different footballing cultures in Asia, are you tempted to try another league?
I'd be open to anything. But right now, I love Hong Kong. This place has really given me a platform. It's changed my life. I feel like I would really love to give something back to Hong Kong one day.

That's me coming up for two years here in the summer, and I've got five more years until I can get a Hong Kong passport. The ambition, once I get that, is to represent the national team. Even if I don't get a national team call-up, saying I would play in Hong Kong for seven years, I would always look back and realise how fortunate I am to even have this opportunity in the first place.

You never know with football, you never know what's going to happen. If an opportunity came up, I would never shut the door.

Do you think that more British players in your position should consider moving abroad?
I don't know why [more British footballers don't move abroad]. Maybe people are scared or nervous but, for me, I had nothing else. I've done my hard graft for five years in part-time football. Don't get me wrong, I had a great life back home, but I was just always not being where I wanted to be.

Maybe it's not everyone's cup of tea, but maybe I can open people's eyes to try and help them understand that there are a lot of opportunities out there, not just in the UK. A lot of people maybe think that if they don't make it in the UK or Europe or America that it's over. And maybe it is daunting the thought of moving to Asia but, if you come over to Hong Kong or Japan, I can almost guarantee that you won't regret it.

Interview by Jamie Evans

Glenn Moore

All change in the NWSL

As a new season of women's soccer begins in the US, the NWSL faces plenty of challenges

Jessica Berman's appearance on a Las Vegas stage in January to receive the *Sports Illustrated* Innovator of the Year award completed an impressive hat-trick for the NWSL commissioner, following on from being named *Sports Business Journal's* Executive of the Year and a *CNBC* Changemaker.

This trifecta, while honouring the individual, reflected the huge strides the NWSL has made since being embroiled in the shocking revelations of systemic player abuse in 2021, while at the same time having its primacy threatened by the rise of European leagues.

Under Berman, appointed back in April 2022, the league drove a change in training ground culture, backed by lifetime bans for those coaches accused of the most serious behaviours, and a player-centric collective bargaining award (CBA).

The league also abolished the draft and introduced free agency for players, standard practice in European leagues but eye-poppingly innovative in the US. This means players can no longer be forced to join clubs, sometimes thousands of miles away, against their will.

The NWSL also signed a mind-blowing $240 million four-year TV deal, 40 times larger than previously, and experienced a similarly massive growth in franchise valuation.

Clubs are now worth more than $100m on average and generate the highest revenues in women's soccer. According to *Sportico* and *Deloitte* respectively, Kansas City Current were expected to generate $36.3m (£27.6m) in 2024 while Europe's best, Arsenal and Barcelona, had revenues of €17.9m (£15.1m).

Further bolstered by the US team's success at the Paris Olympics – with another surge of interest inevitable if their gold medal is defended on home soil at Los Angeles 2028 – the NWSL heads into its 13th year in rude health.

However, there remain clouds.

The league's growth, and promise of revenue-sharing via the CBA, has not stopped the talent drain across the Atlantic. NWSL clubs may be able to match the likes of Barcelona, Lyon and Chelsea when it comes to transfer fees and wages, but they cannot offer the Champions League (CONCACAF's version is effectively a US-Mexican competition), or the experience of playing in a nation steeped in football culture.

The defection of national team stand-out Naomi Girma from San Diego Wave to Chelsea, where she joins USWNT team-mates Catarina Macario and Mia Fishel, for a world-record $1.1m is a huge blow. The departure of Brazilian star Kerolin, from North Carolina Courage to Manchester City, is another.

Nor is the player-abuse scandal over. The league and Wave are jointly facing legal action taken by six ex-employees at the Californian club who allege "discrimination, sexual harassment, retaliation and wrongful termination". In addition, Utah Royals have had to defend themselves against allegations of "emotional and psychological abuse" by former goalkeeper Carly Nelson.

There is also some pushback on the reforms with several club administrators telling *ESPN*, anonymously, that the league has gone too far, with coaching and management staff on edge during interactions with players for fear they may inadvertently transgress.

The National Women's Soccer League heads into its 13th year in rude health. However, there remain clouds

NWSL commissioner ...Jessica Berman

The league's growth also brings issues. Denver held off Cincinnati and Cleveland to be named the league's 16th franchise for a record $110m fee. They are due to join in 2026 along with Boston.

However, neither are likely to have their stadium ready. Denver want to build one but will have to start in a temporary home. Boston plan to refurbish a 70-year-old stadium in partnership with the local authority but, nearly 18 months after the NWSL agreed their admission, work is still to start with a legal challenge by local residents in court this March.

Yet to be addressed is how Boston and Denver are going to be competitive without the draft, which has previously been used to give new teams a lift. Nor are they the only ones pondering the repercussions. The NWSL has long been the most competitive major women's league, a fact underlined both by the variety of title winners and by a FIFPro survey revealing that over the last decade a win by four goals or more occurred every 24 matches – in Europe's big five the average ranged from one in four (France) to one in seven (Spain).

However, this is partly due to the draft, through which the worst teams receive the best rookies. Now it is an open market, clubs will have to use the same methods European ones do to attract talent – cash, facilities, playing opportunity and a coach's vision and personality.

The league hopes the retention of a salary cap will maintain a measure of equality, and it is not as if there has been total equality to date – for example, Portland Thorns are nearly always good, Houston Dash usually poor.

A new season...the 2025 NWSL campaign kicks off in Marcn

Nevertheless it is hard to imagine a European league producing a title winner like Orlando who had finished outside the top six for the previous five seasons.

The Florida franchise not only won the post-season play-offs (a format that makes shock winners like NJ/NY Gotham City in 2023 much more likely), they won the regular season. At the time of writing, Seb Hines had retained all his champion team – including Marta who signed a new two-year contract at 38 – but the coach was yet to strengthen.

The major moves were elsewhere. Courage replaced Kerolin with Jaedyn Shaw from San Diego in a $450,000 deal. That topped the $400,000 paid to Gotham by Houston for another US attack-minded star, Yazmeen Ryan.

Lynn Williams, the NWSL's all-time top scorer, joined Seattle Reign from Gotham who replaced her with Gabi Portilho on a free from Corinthians. The 29-year-old shone for Brazil at the Olympics.

There are also new coaches, the most notable of which is Jonas Eidevall – whose tenure at Arsenal turned sour in October – at Wave. Houston have hired Fabrice Gautrat, which will be interesting when Dash play Orlando Pride as their midfield features his wife, a two-time World Cup winner better known by her maiden name Morgan Brian. Mark Parsons, who steered Thorns to the title in 2017, is back, but as a sporting director, at Angel City.

It all starts on March 7 with the Challenge Cup between Orlando Pride and Washington Spirit, followed by the regular season opening on March 14. The play-offs begin on November 7 with the final on November 22.

Round-up

Impressive caretaker ...Renee Slegers

LYON SHOOTOUT SHOCK

Lyon, winners of the Coupe de France in nine of the last 12 seasons, suffered their earliest ever exit with a shock 10-9 penalty-shootout defeat to Reims in the round of 32. Goalkeeper Laura Benkarth missed the decisive penalty with all 22 players taking one.

BEATTIE BOWS OUT, FAHEY'S FAREWELL

Scotland legend Jen Beattie announced her retirement from the game after a career that spanned 143 international caps and nine years – across two different spells – at Arsenal. Her announcement followed the news that Niamh Fahey was calling time on her international career. The Liverpool centre-back's 115 appearances makes her the Republic of Ireland's fifth-most capped player of all time.

NEW COACHES FOR CANADA, REPUBLIC OF IRELAND & ARSENAL

Canada appointed former Manchester United and San Diego Wave manager Casey Stoney as head coach, drawing a line under the embarrassing drone scandal that broke during the Olympics and led to the axing and banning of previous incumbent, and fellow Englishwoman, Bev Priestman.

Carla Ward took over as Republic of Ireland head coach following stints with Sheffield United, Birmingham City and Aston Villa.

In the WSL, Arsenal confirmed Renee Slegers as manager after an impressive caretaker spell in which she won ten and drew one of 11 matches.

Canada's new head coach... Casey Stoney

PANAMA FA PRESIDENT BANNED

The president of the Panamanian Football Association, Manuel Arias, has been suspended for six months by FIFA's Ethics Committee for his comments on the team's star player, Marta Cox. "She's out of shape, she's fat, she couldn't move on the pitch," Arias said in response to Cox's criticism of facilities after the 2024 CONCACAF W Gold Cup.

Star player ...Panama's Marta Cox

BROOKLYN LEAD WAY IN USL

At the mid-winter break Brooklyn FC were clear at the top of the inaugural USL Super League, America's new top-tier Division 1 women's league. Despite drawing by far the lowest gates (678 against a league average 2,648), six straight wins gave Jessica Silva's team a six-point cushion over Dallas Trinity in the eight-club competition.

FIFPRO HIGHLIGHT IMBALANCES

A report by international players' union FIFPro revealed a huge disparity on workloads in the women's game with elite players travelling and playing to excess while others do not have sufficient matches. Arsenal's Mariona Caldentey played 64 matches for Barcelona and Spain in 2023-24, nearly double the average of 33, while club and country colleague Aitana Bonmati spent the equivalent of more than five days in transit while effectively circling the world twice.

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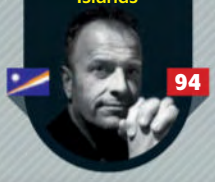

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Africa

MARK GLEESON

Review

Al Hilal overcome war and displacement to advance

Sudanese club are the undoubted standout story of the African Champions League campaign so far as the group stage concludes

Sudan's Al Hilal overcame the difficulty of their exiled existence to confound the odds and qualify for the last eight of the African Champions League, securing their spot with two games to spare.

They were the first side to book their progress to the quarter-finals despite their country continuing to be embroiled in a brutal civil war. Based thousands of miles from home, in Mauritania, Al Hilal picked up ten points from their opening four Group A games to make sure of a top-two finish, defying difficult odds and ensuring an extraordinary feat.

They were joined by another five clubs, including holders Al Ahly of Egypt and last season's runners-up Esperance of Tunisia, following the penultimate round of fixtures, leaving only two more places to be settled going into the last matchday.

These were taken by South Africa's Mamelodi Sundowns and MC Alger, who held on for a goalless draw away to Young Africans in the face of 60,000 Tanzanians willing on the home side for the win that would have seen them go through instead.

In recent editions, Sundowns have been the best performers in the group stage only to crash out in the knockout stages, but this time they laboured their way through. They fired coach Manqoba Mngqithi after drawing their opening pair of Group A fixtures and in his place hired Miguel Cardoso, the Portuguese coach that took Esperance to last season's final.

Sundowns were far from convincing in finishing second to Morocco's Royal

Armed Forces (AS FAR), but Cardoso said that it does not matter: "Being first or second is not a big difference. All the teams in the last eight are even in terms of the capacity. They are very, very strong, all of them," he said.

Record Champions League winners Al Ahly did not top their group either. They lost their 27-match unbeaten run in the competition to Chabab Belouzidad in Algeria on matchday four and were beaten 2-1 at home in Cairo by Orlando Pirates of South Africa, who went through the group stage unbeaten to reach the last eight for the first time since 2018.

Pirates' 14-point haul in Group C was the most of any club in this season's group stage and saw them serve notice of their potential, even if their Spanish coach Jose Riveiro kept insisting he and the players were all learning on a new stage that none of them had experienced previously.

Esperance and Egypt's Pyramids dominated Group D and both finished on 13 points with the Tunisians topping the group because of their better head-to-head record.

Esperance bounced back from a poor start to their domestic season, which saw them fire Cardoso in October and bring in Romanian coach Laurentiu Reghecampf who had them back in form for the group phase.

Pyramids won their last group game 6-0 over Champions League debutants Djoliba of Mali, who finished bottom of the table behind Angola's Sagrada Esperanca and without a win.

The other group stage newcomers – Maniema Union from the Democratic Republic of Congo and Stade d'Abidjan of the Ivory Coast – also failed to win a game between them.

It was Al Hilal who looked the most impressive early on, although they lost their last two group matches after progress to the last eight was assured.

"It is an extraordinary group, because despite what they are going through, when they are on the field, they remain focused, attentive and give the best of themselves," said coach Florent Ibenge. "We are living at a hotel, which is not quite normal. Normal is being at home. But at least we can play in a championship and remain competitive."

Al Hilal were the first side to book their progress to the quarter-finals despite their country continuing to be embroiled in a brutal civil war

Al Hilal and Khartoum neighbours Al Merreikh are both getting regular competition as guests in the Mauritania league this season.

Unusually, the group stage of this season's two African club competitions were played over three successive weekends in December, with a short fortnight break for the holiday period, followed by another three successive weekends of action in January. There will be a full two-month break before the quarter-finals kick off in late March.

In the African Confederation Cup, holders Zamalek of Egypt and last season's runners-up Renaissance Berkane of Morocco both romped through the group phase, as did 2023 winners USM Alger.

But CS Sfaxien of Tunisia, who have won the Confederation Cup more times (three) than any other club, finished last in their group and former Champions League winners Enyimba of Nigeria did not make it to the last eight either.

Final group standings on page 97.

Laboured through...South African champions Mamelodi Sundowns were unconvincing as they progressed to the knockout rounds

Contenders...South Africa's Orlando Pirates drew 0-0 at home and won 2-1 away to holders Al Ahly of Egypt in the group stage

United States

JAMES NALTON

MLS's biggest-ever season

The league welcomes its 30th club in time for the landmark 30th campaign

Thirty teams will compete in Major League Soccer's 30th anniversary season as the league embarks on its final full campaign before the World Cup arrives in 2026.

The introduction of a new expansion team, San Diego FC, evens out the Western and Eastern Conferences to 15 teams apiece for what is, in many ways, the league's biggest-ever season.

2025 is also the final year of Lionel Messi's current MLS contract, but Inter Miami co-owner, Jorge Mas, has already stated his intention for the Argentine all-time great to remain with the club through 2026 when they'll move into a new stadium.

Before then, Inter Miami and Messi have unfinished business as they look to go one better on last year's performance and lift the MLS Cup.

Holders...LA Galaxy won last season's MLS Cup

ABOVE: MLS arrival...San Diego's Hirving Lozano

LEFT: Another season...Luis Suarez and Lionel Messi will lead Inter Miami's MLS Cup bid

The team topped the regular season with a record-breaking points tally to lift the Supporters' Shield, but were then knocked out of the play-offs in the first round.

In MLS, as in most American sports, the post-season play-off winners are considered the champions of that particular season. Although league tables are still used for things like continental qualification, and the Supporters' Shield is increasing in stature, the Messi moment Inter Miami really want is an MLS Cup win.

Once again, Messi will be joined by former Barcelona team-mates Sergio Busquets, Jordi Alba and Luis Suarez, as well as another ex-colleague in the dugout, Javier Mascherano, who has taken over as head coach. It was originally thought that Suarez would only spend one season in MLS before retiring at the end of 2024, but his only retirement last year was from international football and he signed a new deal with Inter Miami through 2025. Maybe the Uruguayan found MLS easier than he thought he would – he and Messi scored 20 goals each as Inter Miami broke the regular season points record. The Uruguayan will hope he can repeat this performance and is hanging on for one more year in the hope of an MLS Cup win.

The team that did lift the MLS Cup last season, LA Galaxy, will be looking to show that 2024 wasn't a one-off and that their huge improvement from 2023, when they finished second-bottom in the Western Conference, can continue. Their trio of Joseph Paintsil, Dejan Joveljic and Gabriel Pec is one of the best attacking units in the league, but star man Riqui Puig will be a big miss as he'll be out for much of the season with an ACL injury.

Speaking of ones to watch, Columbus Crew will be expected to challenge once again. Like Miami, the Crew were knocked out in round one of the play-offs last year, and will also have their eye on the Supporters' Shield.

Shiny new teams are always a draw but San Diego FC haven't quite garnered the buzz of previous expansion sides. Mexico winger Hirving Lozano is their headline signing, with Danish forward Anders Dreyer, a new signing from Anderlecht, set to line up on the opposite flank. The squad also includes former Manchester United and Middlesbrough defender Paddy McNair, USA midfielder Luca de la Torre and Tomas Angel, the son of Colombia legend Juan Pablo.

Inter Miami and Messi have unfinished business as they look to go one better on last year's performance and lift the MLS Cup

As well as Mascherano, there have been other notable changes in the dugout. Two of the highest-profile United States men's national team managers of recent decades, Gregg Berhalter and Bruce Arena, are both coaching in the league at Chicago Fire and San Jose Earthquakes respectively. Both have taken up combined coaching and sporting director roles at their clubs, meaning they have more say in the overall running and make-up of the roster than most other coaches.

Elsewhere the former Celtic manager, and an MLS Cup winner with New York City FC in 2021, Ronny Deila has taken over at Atlanta United, while the Swedish ex-Aston Villa defender Olof Mellberg is the new head coach at St Louis City. Philadelphia Union are entering their first season in 11 years without Jim Curtin at the helm after he was replaced by former St Louis coach Bradley Carnell.

Some notable new player moves include ex-Bayern Munich forward Eric Maxim Choupo-Moting joining the New York Red Bulls, and striker Brandon Vazquez returning to the league from Mexican giants Monterrey to join Austin FC.

Arena's Earthquakes also made a ripple within the league, signing two of its greatest goal-getters in Cristian Arango from Real Salt Lake and Josef Martinez from CF Montreal, while Dean Smith's Charlotte FC added ex-Crystal Palace winger Wilfried Zaha.

MLS remains fascinating on and off the pitch, and there is plenty to look out for in what looks set to be a celebratory year.

Japan

MIKE PLASTOW

Preview

Vissel Kobe chasing J. League history

The reigning champions are aiming to become the first team since Kashima Antlers 16 years ago to win a hat-trick of successive J. League crowns

The 2025 J. League season kicked off with the Osaka derby between Gamba and Cerezo on the evening of February 14. The decision to start the league in Osaka reflected last season's westward shift in Japan's balance of power, with both Gamba Osaka and Sanfrecce Hiroshima again poised to challenge strongly for the J. League title.

The rise of the West, however, is still more about Gamba's other near neighbours, Vissel Kobe, whose back-to-back title triumphs in 2023 and 2024 proved Vissel are now the team to beat. Can Vissel now become only the second team, following Kashima Antlers from 2007 to 2009, to win the J. League three years in a row? And how about the 2024-25 Asian Champions League Elite as well?

Vissel had never won any big title before 2023, but manager Takayuki Yoshida starts his third full season in charge with two league titles plus the 2024 Emperor's Cup now under his belt. Yoshida's success is reminiscent of Toru Oniki's at Kawasaki Frontale in 2017-18, but even Oniki had to wait until 2020 for his first Emperor's Cup as a manager.

Unsurprisingly, Vissel have largely stayed with the same squad for the coming season. Their most notable signing is Caetano from Corinthians, a 25-year-old Brazilian centre-back. The biggest departure is the 2014 and 2018 World Cup midfielder and Vissel captain, Hotaru Yamaguchi, now 34, who begins a new challenge at second division V-Varen Nagasaki.

Michael Skibbe also performed wonders in leading Sanfrecce to second in the league last season following consecutive third-place finishes in his first two years in charge. Sanfrecce finished 11th in 2021, the

Team to beat...Vissel Kobe are chasing their third title in a row

Underdogs...newly-promoted Machida Zelvia provided one of the stories of last season

season before he arrived. Their main signing so far is striker Ryo Germain from Jubilo Iwata but more changes are surely in the pipeline following the departure of three foreign forwards Goncalo Paciencia, Pieros Sotiriou and Douglas Vieira, as well as attacking midfielder Ezequiel, during the close season.

Machida Zelvia, third in their first ever top-flight season, have made many low-profile squad changes but look well set to produce more of the same bold, counter-attacking football that brought them a glimpse of glory. Their biggest new signing is playmaker Takuma Nishimura from Yokohama F. Marinos.

In contrast, Gamba, fourth last year, have made few changes at all as coach Dani Poyatos now pushes for the club's first league title since 2014.

Kashima Antlers, the J. League's most titled club, haven't won the title since 2016 but are stepping up their challenge, too, with the appointment of Toru Oniki as their new manager. This is a homecoming of sorts for the 50-year-old, who joined Antlers as a teenager in the J. League's inaugural season of 1993. Kashima have also signed Brazilian centre-forward Leo Ceara from Cerezo.

Yokohama F. Marinos, whose fortunes have dipped somewhat since last winning the league under Kevin Muscat in 2022, have turned to Steve Holland, the long-term assistant manager at Chelsea and England, to turn things around. Holland promises "aggressive, attacking football" and "to build a team that consistently competes at the highest level." Holland will also be able to chase the 2024-25 Asian Champions League Elite from the front with Marinos currently top of the East Asian table. Their new signings for 2025 include Colombian defender Jeison Quinones from Aguilas Doradas following Eduardo's departure to J2 League outfit V-Varen.

Holland's arrival draws a line under Marinos' Australian period, which started under Ange Postecoglou in 2018 and continued under three of his erstwhile assistants: Muscat, Harry Kewell and John Hutchinson. Another close member of the Postecoglou circle, Peter Cklamovski, has left FC Tokyo to manage Malaysia, but even so Postecoglou's influence still casts a slight shadow over Japanese football. Arthur Papas, who worked with Postecoglou at Marinos and spent last season in Thailand, is the new manager at Cerezo, while Hutchinson has just taken over at Jubilo Iwata with the aim of bouncing straight back from last year's relegation.

Can Vissel now become only the second team, following Kashima Antlers from 2007 to 2009, to win the J. League three years in a row?

Kawasaki Frontale, too, are well-placed in the Asian Champions League Elite and looking for a return to their recent glory days. Shigetoshi Hasebe replaces Oniki there after five impressive years at Avispa Fukuoka.

Urawa Red Diamonds, three-time Asian champions, are not in this season's Asian competition but will be at the new-look Club World Cup this summer. Polish manager Maciej Skorza, who led them to their last Asian title in 2023, is back in charge. Reds' biggest signing so far is Brazilian striker Matheus Savio from Kashiwa Reysol, while Bryan Linssen, now 34, has left for NEC.

Other departures include the veteran Urawa and Japan striker Shinzo Koroki, who has retired; Brazilian striker Diego Oliveira, also retired after seven years at FC Tokyo; and the former Borussia Dortmund and Stuttgart goalkeeper, Mitchell Langerak, now 36, not retiring after seven years at Nagoya Grampus but returning instead to his first club, Melbourne Victory.

Further down the league, there is more than a passing interest, too, in the fortunes of resurgent Omiya Ardija, last season's runaway third division champions and now reborn as RB Omiya Ardija, the J. League's first 100 per cent foreign-owned club, following last summer's acquisition by Red Bull.

The 2025 season will be the last of the J. League's present calendar-year format; 2026 will start from February to June with a special, inter-season regional league competition followed by national play-offs. The new-look 2026-27 season will then run from August 2026 to May 2027 to better fit with the international calendar.

New arrival ...Steve Holland has taken charge of Yokohama F. Marinos

Marshall Islands

STEVE MENARY

Bringing football to the Marshall Islands

The Pacific islanders are using futsal to help build their football scene – with OFC membership the next target

The Marshall Islands are hoping to finally secure a place on the bottom rung of football's affiliation ladder this year after submitting an application to join the Oceania Football Confederation.

Formerly a US protectorate, the chain of five islands and 29 atolls in the North Pacific declared independence in 1979 but remained one of a tiny handful of countries recognised as independent by the United Nations but without a recognised football association.

That began to change in 2020 with the formation of the Marshall Islands Soccer Federation (MISF), which has been developed with locals helped by an enthusiastic community formed online. At the end of 2022, Englishman Lloyd Owers was appointed as their first-ever technical director.

The only organised football on the Marshalls had been a nine-a-side league on the US airbase at Kwajalein Atoll (also known as Ebeye Island), predominantly featuring service personnel, but the MISF started a futsal tournament, the Ratak Cup.

In July, proceeds of sales of a replica shirt enabled the MISF to stage a futsal tournament, the Outrigger Challenge Cup, featuring a Marshall Islands side led by Owers, as well as the Federated States of Micronesia and Kiribati. The latter emerged victorious, defeating the hosts in the final.

ABOVE: Outrigger Cup...the Marshall Islands' futsal team

> "We are slowly developing soccer in the communities. We will get there, sometime in the future, to be a member of OFC"
>
> Marshall Islands Soccer Federation vice-president Divine Waiti

"In addition to that headline event, we have been focusing on our grassroots activities that are just as important for our long-term future," explains MISF commercial director Matt Webb.

"Soccer has been added to the National Physical Education Curriculum, we have partnered with the Special Olympics team to run events for disabled athletes, and taken our programme to islands outside of the capital for the first time."

A second season of the Ratak Cup kicks off in February 2025. Regular training sessions have been staged on Ebeye since October with up to 70 kids taking part in organised soccer for the first time after the MISF hired a player from Kiribati, Bangao Bakabane, to coach in local schools. A women's national team futsal camp was also held in Springdale, Arkansas, which is home to the largest Marshallese diaspora outside of the islands.

Divine Waiti, a local attorney and MISF vice-president, says: "We are slowly developing soccer in the communities. We will get there, sometime in the future, to be a member of OFC."

Although attempts to organise an 11-a-side game are a priority, the biggest challenge for the MISF is official recognition. After sending speculative messages to the Asian Football Confederation and the East Asian Football Federation, the MISF opted to try for associate membership of the OFC.

Kiribati joined the OFC as an associate member in 2007 and were followed 12 years later by Tuvalu. There has been no sign of either joining the OFC's 11 full members and four years ago, Niue were ejected for lack of football development – a claim that the tiny island's federation vehemently disputed.

A decision on the MISF's membership application would be decided at the OFC congress in May, but the bid first has to be recommended to the body's executive committee by the general secretariat.

Acknowledging the application, an OFC spokesperson said: "We can confirm the MISF have been advised of the requirements for admission under the OFC Statutes, including the ability to demonstrate the ability to deliver football within the region and participate in OFC tournaments."

The MISF hope that all their hard work to date will merit recognition by the OFC.

Huddle... the Marshall Islands team during the Outrigger Cup final

Tales from the 211

Exploring the weird and wonderful world of football across FIFA's 211 member nations – and beyond

How the mighty have fallen...Guangzhou were Asian Champions League winners in 2013 and 2015

GUANGZHOU FC PAY THE PRICE FOR CHINESE PROPERTY MARKET CRISIS

Following their purchase by the Evergrande Real Estate Group in 2010, Guangzhou FC – who were subsequently renamed Guangzhou Evergrande – enjoyed unprecedented success. With the likes of Marcello Lippi, Luiz Felipe Scolari and Fabio Cannavaro in the dugout, they twice won the Asian Champions League and claimed eight Super League titles. But with the Evergrande Group amassing debts of over US$300 billion and eventually defaulting in 2021, the club has fared less well in recent years. They were relegated in 2022 and have since been competing in China's second tier.

But matters went from bad to worse in January 2025. Due to their "historical debts", the Chinese Football Association excluded Guangzhou FC from the list of 49 clubs set to take part in the country's professional leagues this season and they – along with Super League outfit Cangzhou Mighty Lions and third-tier club Hunan Billows – have now disbanded.

FOOTBALL TO RETURN TO THE REMOTE ASCENSION ISLAND

An 11-a-side tournament is set to return to Ascension Island, a British overseas territory in the Atlantic Ocean with a population of around 1,000 people.

Competitive football was last played on the island in 2018, when Good Vibes beat Merlin Riders in the Flipper Trophy final. But the beautiful game has not been played in the intervening years – in part due to a waterlogged and turtle-infested pitch. The return of football to Ascension Island, which is 1,100km from its closest inhabited landmass, makes it the joint second-most remote place – along with Saint Helena – currently hosting a football tournament worldwide.

Easter Island, which is 1,850km away from the Juan Fernandez Islands in the Pacific Ocean, sits top of the rankings. To the best of our knowledge, there is no more remote tournament than on the locally named Rapa Nui, where football is played in the shadow of the famous moai statues, and FC Moaroa were crowned champions in December of last year. But that would change if football returned to Tristan da Cunha – widely regarded as the world's most remote inhabited island. The islanders used to play five-a-side and even created their own 11-a-side team, but had nobody to play against and only got a game when boats docked on the island.

GOZO'S VICTORIA HOTSPURS MAKE FLYING START IN MALTA

Gozo, an island located to the north of Malta, has its own football pyramid with two divisions and 13 teams. It used to be 14, but local club Victoria Hotspurs made history last spring when they became the first-ever team to migrate from the Gozitan system to the Maltese pyramid. They joined the fourth-tier National Amateur League 2 and have made a flying start to life across the water, with 36 points from their 12 games at the time of writing. They did technically lose one game – 2-0 to St George's – but an ineligible player fielded by the opposition ensured they were awarded a 3-0 victory and kept their impressive 100 per cent record going.

This is only the beginning of their journey, however. Local journalist Gianluca Lia believes the Hotspurs – who were named after English outfit Tottenham by a former president and who make the short ferry crossing to St Paul's Bay on neighbouring Malta to contest their home games – "should easily win the fourth tier and even the third tier".

Current president Anton Tabone hopes the Gozitans, who recently beat a second-tier opponent in the FA Trophy to set up a David v Goliath last-16 tie against 26-time Maltese champions Floriana, can rise even higher up the ranks and reach the Premier League at some point. Watch this space.

Lee Wingate

COMING UP...

O Elvas v Tirsense
Portuguese Cup, February 26
O Elvas, who hail from near Portugal's eastern border with Spain, stunned top-flight club Vitoria Guimaraes 2-1 in the last round to set up a Portuguese Cup quarter-final clash with fellow fourth-tier outfit Tirsense, guaranteeing at least one lower-league side in the last four.

Magdeburg v Hamburg
2. Bundesliga, March 16
Promotion-chasing Magdeburg briefly topped Germany's second tier in early 2025 despite having failed to win a home game all season. Three points against Hamburg, who were top at the time of writing, would bolster their bid to reach the Bundesliga for the first time ever.

Comoros v Mali
African 2026 World Cup qualifier, March 19
Comoros – an archipelago off Africa's east coast in the Indian Ocean – are on a six-game unbeaten run and top their World Cup qualifying group on goal difference ahead of Ghana. A home win v Mali would carry the unfancied islanders a step closer to their maiden appearance at the finals.

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Club Football

EUROPE

2024-25 UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Matchday 7

Jan 21 – Monaco
Monaco (Fra) 1 (Singo 8)
Aston Villa (Eng) 0

Jan 21 – Bergamo
Atalanta (Ita) 5 (Retegui 12, Pasalic 58, De Ketelaere 63, Lookman 90, Brescianini 90+4)
Sturm Graz (Aut) 0

Jan 21 – Madrid
Atletico Madrid (Spa) 2 (Alvarez 52, 90)
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 1 (Hincapie 45+1)

Jan 21 – Bologna
Bologna (Ita) 2 (Dallinga 71, Iling-Junior 72)
Borussia Dortmund (Ger) 1 (Guirassy 15 pen)

Jan 21 – Brugge
Club Brugge (Bel) 0
Juventus (Ita) 0

Jan 21 – Belgrade
Red Star Belgrade (Srb) 2 (Ndiaye 71, Djiga 77)
PSV (Ned) 3 (De Jong 17, 23, Flamingo 43)

Jan 21 – Liverpool
Liverpool (Eng) 2 (Salah 34, Elliott 67)
Lille (Fra) 1 (David 62)

Jan 21 – Bratislava
Slovan Bratislava (Svk) 1 (Metsoko 85)
Stuttgart (Ger) 3 (Leweling 11, 36, Rieder 87)

Jan 21 – Lisbon
Benfica (Por) 4 (Pavlidis 2, 22, 30 pen, Araujo 68 og)
Barcelona (Spa) 5 (Lewandowski 13 pen, 78 pen, Raphinha 64, 90+6, Garcia 86)

Jan 22 – Gelsenkirchen
Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr) 2 (Kevin 18, Sudakov 37 pen)
Brest (Fra) 0

Jan 22 – Leipzig
RB Leipzig (Ger) 2 (Sesko 19, Poulsen 78)
Sporting (Por) 1 (Gyokeres 75)

Jan 22 – Milan
Milan (Ita) 1 (Leao 37)
Girona (Spa) 0

Jan 22 – Prague
Sparta Prague (Cze) 0
Internazionale (Ita) 1 (L. Martinez 12)

Jan 22 – London
Arsenal (Eng) 3 (Rice 2, Havertz 66, Odegaard 90+1)
Dinamo Zagreb (Cro) 0

Jan 22 – Glasgow
Celtic (Sco) 1 (Benito 86 og)
Young Boys (Sui) 0

Jan 22 – Rotterdam
Feyenoord (Ned) 3 (Gimenez 21, 45+9 pen, Ueda 89)
Bayern Munich (Ger) 0

Jan 22 – Paris
Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) 4 (Dembele 56, Barcola 60, Neves 78, Ramos 90+3)
Manchester City (Eng) 2 (Grealish 50, Haaland 53)

Jan 22 – Madrid
Real Madrid (Spa) 5 (Rodrygo 23, 34, Mbappe 48, Vinicius Junior 55, 77)
Red Bull Salzburg (Aut) 1 (Bidstrup 85)

Matchday 8

Jan 29 – Birmingham
Aston Villa (Eng) 4 (Rogers 3, 5, 90+1, Watkins 60)
Celtic (Sco) 2 (Idah 36, 38)

Jan 29 – Leverkusen
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 2 (Wirtz 32, Tella 64)
Sparta Prague (Cze) 0

Jan 29 – Dortmund
Borussia Dortmund (Ger) 3 (Guirassy 17, 44, Bensebaini 79)
Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr) 1 (Marlon 50)

Jan 29 – Bern
Young Boys (Sui) 0
Red Star Belgrade (Srb) 1 (Kanga 69)

Jan 29 – Barcelona
Barcelona (Spa) 2 (Yamal 47, Araujo 72)
Atalanta (Ita) 2 (Ederson 67, Pasalic 79)

Jan 29 – Munich
Bayern Munich (Ger) 3 (Muller 8, Kane 63, Coman 84)
Slovan Bratislava (Svk) 1 (Tolic 90)

Jan 29 – Milan
Internazionale (Ita) 3 (L. Martinez 4 pen, 16, 67)
Monaco (Fra) 0

Jan 29 – Salzburg
Red Bull Salzburg (Aut) 1 (Daghim 90+1)
Atletico Madrid (Spa) 4 (Simeone 5, Griezmann 13, 45+1, Llorente 63)

Jan 29 – Girona
Girona (Spa) 1 (Danjuma 28)
Arsenal (Eng) 2 (Jorginho 38 pen, Nwaneri 42)

Jan 29 – Zagreb
Dinamo Zagreb (Cro) 2 (Baturina 19, Pjaca 60)
Milan (Ita) 1 (Pulisic 53)

Jan 29 – Turin
Juventus (Ita) 0
Benfica (Por) 2 (Pavlidis 16, Kokcu 80)

Jan 29 – Lille
Lille (Fra) 6 (Sahraoui 4, Trauner 38 og, 76 og, Gomes 57, David 74, Cabella 80)
Feyenoord (Ned) 1 (Gimenez 14)

Jan 29 – Manchester
Manchester City (Eng) 3 (Kovacic 53, Ordonez 62 og, Savinho 77)
Club Brugge (Bel) 1 (Onyedika 45)

Jan 29 – Eindhoven
PSV (Ned) 3 (Bakayoko 35, Saibari 45, Pepi 45+6)
Liverpool (Eng) 2 (Gakpo 28 pen, Elliott 40)

Jan 29 – Klagenfurt
Sturm Graz (Aut) 1 (Malic 42)
RB Leipzig (Ger) 0

Jan 29 – Lisbon
Sporting (Por) 1 (Harder 77)
Bologna (Ita) 1 (Pobega 21)

Jan 29 – Guingamp
Brest (Fra) 0
Real Madrid (Spa) 3 (Rodrygo 27, 78, Bellingham 56)

Jan 29 – Stuttgart
Stuttgart (Ger) 1 (Pacho 77 og)
Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) 4 (Barcola 6, Dembele 17, 35, 54)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Liverpool (Q)	8	7	0	1	17	5	21
Barcelona (Q)	8	6	1	1	28	13	19
Arsenal (Q)	8	6	1	1	16	3	19
Inter (Q)	8	6	1	1	11	1	19
Atletico Madrid (Q)	8	6	0	2	20	12	18
B. Leverkusen (Q)	8	5	1	2	15	7	16
Lille (Q)	8	5	1	2	17	10	16
Aston Villa (Q)	8	5	1	2	13	6	16
Atalanta*	8	4	3	1	20	6	15
B. Dortmund*	8	5	0	3	22	12	15
Real Madrid*	8	5	0	3	20	12	15
Bayern Munich*	8	5	0	3	20	12	15
Milan*	8	5	0	3	14	11	15
PSV*	8	4	2	2	16	12	14
PSG*	8	4	1	3	14	9	13
Benfica*	8	4	1	3	16	12	13
Monaco*	8	4	1	3	13	13	13
Brest*	8	4	1	3	10	11	13
Feyenoord*	8	4	1	3	18	21	13
Juventus*	8	3	3	2	9	7	12
Celtic*	8	3	3	2	13	14	12
Man City*	8	3	2	3	18	14	11
Sporting*	8	3	2	3	13	12	11
Club Brugge*	8	3	2	3	7	11	11
Dinamo Zagreb	8	3	2	3	12	19	11
Stuttgart	8	3	1	4	13	17	10
Shakhtar Donetsk	8	2	1	5	8	16	7
Bologna	8	1	3	4	4	9	6
Red Star Belgrade	8	2	0	6	13	22	6
Sturm Graz	8	2	0	6	5	14	6
Sparta Prague	8	1	1	6	7	21	4
RB Leipzig	8	1	0	7	8	15	3
Girona	8	1	0	7	5	13	3
RB Salzburg	8	1	0	7	5	27	3
Slovan Bratislava	8	0	0	8	7	27	0
Young Boys	8	0	0	8	3	24	0

**Enter knockout-phase play-offs – the draw and schedule can be viewed on page 20*

2024-25 EUROPA LEAGUE

Matchday 7

Jan 21 – Istanbul
Galatasaray (Tur) 3 (Sanchez 6, Bardakci 21, Osimhen 53 pen)
Dynamo Kyiv (Ukr) 3 (Vanat 44, Yarmolenko 68, 81)

Jan 22 – Istanbul
Besiktas (Tur) 4 (Rashica 7, 60, Silva 77, Joao Mario 90+2 pen)
Athletic Club (Spa) 1 (Gomez 45)

Jan 23 – Alkmaar
AZ (Ned) 1 (Parrott 80)
Roma (Ita) 0

Jan 23 – Porto
Porto (Por) 0
Olympiacos (Gre) 1 (El Kaabi 79)

Jan 23 – Plzen
Viktoria Plzen (Cze) 2 (Cerv 3, Adu 45)
Anderlecht (Bel) 0

Jan 23 – Istanbul
Fenerbahce (Tur) 0
Lyon (Fra) 0

Jan 23 – Bodo
Bodo/Glimt (Nor) 3 (Hogh 39, 65 pen, Evjen 62)
Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr) 1 (Peretz 12)

Jan 23 – Malmo
Malmo (Swe) 2 (Johnsen 32, Christiansen 79)
Twente (Ned) 3 (Steijn 28 pen, Van Wolfswinkel 61 pen, Lagerbielke 64)

Jan 23 – Baku
Qarabag (Aze) 2 (L. Andrade 1, Dawa 41 og)
FCSB (Rou) 3 (Sut 7, 73, Miculescu 45+4)

Jan 23 – Sinsheim
Hoffenheim (Ger) 2 (Stach 68, Mokwa 88)
Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) 3 (Maddison 3, Son Heung-min 22, 77)

Jan 23 – Frankfurt
Eintracht Frankfurt (Ger) 2 (Uzun 49, Ekitike 59)
Ferencvaros (Hun) 0

Jan 23 – Riga
RFS (Lva) 1 (Markhiyev 78)
Ajax (Ned) 0

Jan 23 – Boras
Elfsborg (Swe) 1 (Henriksson 62)
Nice (Fra) 0

Jan 23 – Manchester
Manchester United (Eng) 2 (Butland 52 og, Fernandes 90+2)
Rangers (Sco) 1 (Dessers 88)

Jan 23 – Thessaloniki
PAOK (Gre) 2 (Schwab 26 pen, Konstantelias 56)
Slavia Prague (Cze) 0

Jan 23 – Razgrad
Ludogorets (Bul) 0
Midtjylland (Den) 2 (Osorio 18, Byskov 90+5)

Jan 23 – Brussels
Union Saint-Gilloise (Bel) 2 (Ivanovic 50, 74)
Braga (Por) 1 (El Ouazzani 16)

Jan 23 – Rome
Lazio (Ita) 3 (Gila 5, Zaccagni 32, Castellanos 34)
Real Sociedad (Spa) 1 (Barrenetxea 82)

Matchday 8

Jan 30 – Amsterdam
Ajax (Ned) 2 (Traore 23, Fitz-Jim 58)
Galatasaray (Tur) 1 (Osimhen 90+4)

Jan 30 – Brussels
Anderlecht (Bel) 3 (Vazquez 18, Goto 79, Augustinsson 88)
Hoffenheim (Ger) 4 (Sardella 41 og, Bischof 54, Mokwa 59, Hlozek 65)

Jan 30 – Bilbao
Athletic Club (Spa) 3 (N. Williams 25, Yeray 64, Marton 90+5)
Viktoria Plzen (Cze) 1 (Havel 71)

Jan 30 – Braga
Braga (Por) 1 (Horta 6)
Lazio (Ita) 0

Jan 30 – Hamburg
Dynamo Kyiv (Ukr) 1 (Pikhalonok 76)
RFS (Lva) 0

Jan 30 – Bucharest
FCSB (Rou) 0
Manchester United (Eng) 2 (Dalot 60, Mainoo 68)

Jan 30 – Budapest
Ferencvaros (Hun) 4 (Ben Romdhane 9, 45, Traore 34, B. Varga 82 pen)
AZ (Ned) 3 (Mijnans 76, 90+5, Parrott 90)

Jan 30 – Lyon
Lyon (Fra) 1 (Tolisso 54)
Ludogorets (Bul) 1 (Almeida 77)

Jan 30 – Belgrade
Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr) 0
Porto (Por) 1 (Nico 58)

Jan 30 – Herning
Midtjylland (Den) 2 (Diao 27, Andreasen 86)
Fenerbahce (Tur) 2 (En-Nesyri 39, Dzeko 47)

Jan 30 – Nice
Nice (Fra) 1 (Bouanani 74)
Bodo/Glimt (Nor) 1 (Bjorkan 54)

Jan 30 – Piraeus
Olympiacos (Gre) 3 (El Kaabi 56, 60, Biancone 89)
Qarabag (Aze) 0

Jan 30 – Glasgow
Rangers (Sco) 2 (Raskin 21, Cerny 55)
Union Saint-Gilloise (Bel) 1 (Mac Allister 83)

Jan 30 – San Sebastian
Real Sociedad (Spa) 2 (Oskarsson 43, 48)
PAOK (Gre) 0

Jan 30 – Rome
Roma (Ita) 2 (Angelino 44, Shomurodov 69)
Eintracht Frankfurt (Ger) 0

Jan 30 – Prague
Slavia Prague (Cze) 2 (Chory 46, Schranz 76)
Malmo (Swe) 2 (Ali 69, Bolin 71)

Jan 30 – London
Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) 3 (Scarlett 70, Ajayi 84, Moore 90+4)
Elfsborg (Swe) 0

Jan 30 – Enschede
Twente (Ned) 1 (Rots 76)
Besiktas (Tur) 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Lazio (Q)	8	6	1	1	17	5	19
Athletic Club (Q)	8	6	1	1	15	7	19
Man Utd (Q)	8	5	3	0	16	9	18
Tottenham (Q)	8	5	2	1	17	9	17
E. Frankfurt (Q)	8	5	1	2	14	10	16
Lyon (Q)	8	4	3	1	16	8	15
Olympiacos (Q)	8	4	3	1	9	3	15
Rangers (Q)	8	4	2	2	16	10	14
Bodo/Glimt*	8	4	2	2	14	11	14
Anderlecht*	8	4	2	2	14	12	14
FCSB*	8	4	2	2	10	9	14
Ajax*	8	4	1	3	16	8	13
Real Sociedad*	8	4	1	3	13	9	13
Galatasaray*	8	3	4	1	19	16	13
Roma*	8	3	3	2	10	6	12
Viktoria Plzen*	8	3	3	2	13	12	12
Ferencvaros*	8	4	0	4	15	15	12
Porto*	8	3	2	3	13	11	11
AZ*	8	3	2	3	13	13	11
Midtjylland*	8	3	2	3	9	9	11
Union SG*	8	3	2	3	8	8	11
PAOK*	8	3	1	4	12	10	10
Twente*	8	2	4	2	8	9	10
Fenerbahce*	8	2	4	2	9	11	10
Braga	8	3	1	4	9	12	10
Elfsborg	8	3	1	4	9	14	10
Hoffenheim	8	2	3	3	11	14	9
Besiktas	8	3	0	5	10	15	9
Maccabi Tel Aviv	8	2	0	6	8	17	6
Slavia Prague	8	1	2	5	7	11	5
Malmo	8	1	2	5	10	17	5
RFS	8	1	2	5	6	13	5
Ludogorets	8	0	4	4	4	11	4
Dynamo Kyiv	8	1	1	6	5	18	4
Nice	8	0	3	5	7	16	3
Qarabag	8	1	0	7	6	20	3

**Enter knockout-phase play-offs – the draw and schedule can be viewed on page 20*

2025 SPANISH SUPER CUP

Semi-Finals

Jan 8 – Jeddah
Athletic Club 0
Barcelona 2 (Gavi 17, Yamal 52)

Jan 9 – Jeddah
Real Madrid 3 (Bellingham 63, Valjent 90+2 og, Rodrygo 90+5)
Mallorca 0

Final

Jan 12 – Jeddah
Real Madrid 2 (Mbappe 5, Rodrygo 60)
Barcelona 5 (Yamal 22, Lewandowski 36 pen, Raphinha 39, 48, Balde 45+10)
Real Madrid: Courtois – Vazquez (Asensio 52), Tchouameni (Modric 64), Rudiger, Mendy (Garcia 75); Valverde, Camavinga (Ceballos 46); Rodrygo, Bellingham (Brahim 76), Vinicius Junior; Mbappe.
Barcelona: Szczesny – Kounde, Cubarsi, Martinez (Araujo 28), Balde; Casado, Pedri; Yamal (Olmo 59), Gavi (Pena 59), Raphinha (Torres 79); Lewandowski.
Sent off: Szczesny 56.

2024 SCOTTISH LEAGUE CUP

Final

Dec 15 – Glasgow
Celtic 3 (Taylor 56, Maeda 60, Kuhn 87)
Rangers 3 (Bajrami 41, Diomande 75, Danilo 88)
After Extra-Time. Celtic win 5-4 on pens

2024-25 PORTUGUESE LEAGUE CUP

Final

Jan 11 – Leiria
Sporting 1 (Gyokeres 42 pen)
Benfica 1 (Schjelderup 29)
Benfica win 7-6 on pens

AFRICA

2024-25 CAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Group A

Jan 10 – Algiers
MC Alger (Alg) 1 (Bouras 36 pen)
TP Mazembe (Cod) 0

Jan 12 – Nouakchott
Al Hilal (Sud) 0
Young Africans (Tan) 1 (Aziz Ki 7)

Jan 18 – Lubumbashi
TP Mazembe (Cod) 4 (Diouf 21, Keita 29, Ngimbi 58, Shaibu 89 pen)
Al Hilal (Sud) 0

Jan 18 – Dar es Salaam
Young Africans (Tan) 0
MC Alger (Alg) 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Hilal (Q)	6	3	1	2	6	7	10
MC Alger (Q)	6	2	3	1	4	2	9
Young Africans	6	2	2	2	5	6	8
TP Mazembe	6	1	2	3	7	7	5

Group B

Jan 11 – Kinshasa
Maniema Union (Cod) 1 (Kitambala 38)
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 2 (Shalulile 83, Moanda 90+5 og)

Jan 11 – Meknes
AS FAR (Mar) 1 (Zniti 40 og)
Raja (Mar) 1 (Zerhouni 77 pen)

Jan 19 – Pretoria
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 1 (Shalulile 12)
AS FAR (Mar) 1 (Zouhzouh 83)

Jan 19 – Casablanca
Raja (Mar) 1 (Ennafati 45+5 pen)
Maniema Union (Cod) 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
AS FAR (Q)	6	2	4	0	8	4	10
M. Sundowns (Q)	6	2	3	1	5	4	9
Raja	6	2	2	2	4	5	8
Maniema Union	6	0	3	3	3	7	3

Group C

Jan 11 – Abidjan
Stade d'Abidjan (Civ) 1 (Kore 26)
Al Ahly (Egy) 3 (Ashour 53, 73, 90+5)

Jan 12 – Johannesburg
Orlando Pirates (RSA) 2 (Mofokeng 20, Mbatha 61)
CR Belouizdad (Alg) 1 (Benguit 90+2)

Jan 18 – Cairo
Al Ahly (Egy) 1 (El Shahat 69)
Orlando Pirates (RSA) 2 (Mofokeng 53, Mabaso 83)

Jan 18 – Algiers
CR Belouizdad (Alg) 6 (Meziane 17, Belkhir 27, 36, Mahious 49, Hamroune 87, Zerrouki 90)
Stade d'Abidjan (Civ) 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Orlando Pirates (Q)	6	4	2	0	10	4	14
Al Ahly (Q)	6	3	1	2	14	7	10
CR Belouizdad	6	3	0	3	11	10	9
Stade d'Abidjan	6	0	1	5	4	18	1

Group D

Jan 11 – Luanda
Sagrada Esperanca (Ang) 0
Pyramids (Egy) 1 (Hamdy 90+4)

Jan 12 – Bamako
Djoliba (Mli) 0
Esperance (Tun) 1 (Mokwana 67)

Jan 18 – Tunis
Esperance (Tun) 4 (Jebri 16, 55, 59, Sasse 22)
Sagrada Esperanca (Ang) 1 (Dabanda 45+1)

Jan 18 – Cairo
Pyramids (Egy) 6 (Awujoola 2, Ma. Hamdy 10, Fathi 53, Sobhi 60 pen, Magdy 66, Obama 77)
Djoliba (Mli) 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Esperance (Q)	6	4	1	1	12	3	13
Pyramids (Q)	6	4	1	1	14	4	13
Sagrada Esperanca	6	1	2	3	3	10	5
Djoliba	6	0	2	4	0	12	2

2024-25 CAF CONFEDERATION CUP

Group A

Jan 12:
CS Constantine (Alg) 3-0 CS Sfaxien (Tun);
Bravos do Maquis (Ang) 1-1 Simba (Tan)

Jan 19:
Simba (Tan) 2-0 CS Constantine (Alg);
CS Sfaxien (Tun) 4-0 Bravos do Maquis (Ang)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Simba (Q)	6	4	1	1	8	4	13
CS Constantine (Q)	6	4	0	2	12	6	12
Bravos do Maquis	6	2	1	3	7	14	7
CS Sfaxien	6	1	0	5	7	10	3

Group B

Jan 12:
Stellenbosch (RSA) 2-0 Stade Malien (Mli);
Desportivo Lunda Sul (Ang) 0-0 RS Berkane (Mar)

Jan 19:
RS Berkane (Mar) 5-0 Stellenbosch (RSA);
Stade Malien (Mli) 0-1 Desportivo Lunda Sul (Ang)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
RS Berkane (Q)	6	5	1	0	12	1	16
Stellenbosch (Q)	6	3	0	3	6	10	9
Desportivo LS	6	1	2	3	2	6	5
Stade Malien	6	1	1	4	3	6	4

Group C

Jan 12:
ASC Jaraaf (Sen) 1-0 ASEC Abidjan (Civ);
Orapa United (Bot) 1-2 USM Alger (Alg)

Jan 19:
USM Alger (Alg) 2-0 ASC Jaraaf (Sen);
ASEC Abidjan (Civ) 4-0 Orapa United (Bot)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
USM Alger (Q)	6	4	2	0	14	2	14
ASEC Abidjan (Q)	6	2	2	2	7	5	8
ASC Jaraaf	6	2	2	2	2	4	8
Orapa United	6	0	2	4	1	13	2

Group D

Jan 5:
Black Bulls (Moz) 1-3 Zamalek (Egy);
Enyimba (Nga) 1-1 Al Masry (Egy)

Jan 19:
Zamalek (Egy) 3-1 Enyimba (Nga);
Al Masry (Egy) 3-1 Black Bulls (Moz)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Zamalek (Q)	6	4	2	0	11	4	14
Al Masry (Q)	6	2	3	1	7	4	9
Enyimba	6	1	2	3	8	12	5
Black Bulls	6	1	1	4	7	13	4

SOUTH AMERICA

2025 COPA LIBERTADORES

Qualifying Draw

First Stage

Feb 4-6:
Monagas (Ven) v Defensor Sporting (Uru);
Nacional (Par) v Alianza Lima (Per);
Blooming (Bol) v El Nacional (Ecu)

Feb 11-13:
Defensor Sporting (Uru) v Monagas (Ven);
Alianza Lima (Per) Nacional (Par);
El Nacional (Ecu) v Blooming (Bol)

Second Stage

Feb 18-20:
Deportes Iquique (Chi) v Santa Fe (Col);
The Strongest (Bol) v Bahia (Bra); Nacional (Par)/Alianza Lima (Per) v Boca Juniors (Arg);
Blooming (Bol)/El Nacional (Ecu) v Barcelona SC (Ecu); Universidad Central (Ven) v Corinthians (Bra); Boston River (Uru) v Nublense (Chi);
Monagas (Ven)/Defensor Sporting (Uru) v Cerro Porteno (Par); Tolima (Col) v Melgar (Per);

Feb 25-27:
Santa Fe (Col) v Deportes Iquique (Chi); Bahia (Bra) v The Strongest (Bol); Boca Juniors (Arg) v Nacional (Par)/Alianza Lima (Per); Barcelona SC (Ecu) v Blooming (Bol)/El Nacional (Ecu);
Corinthians (Bra) v Universidad Central (Ven);
Nublense (Chi) v Boston River (Uru); Cerro Porteno (Par) v Monagas (Ven)/Defensor Sporting (Uru); Melgar (Per) v Tolima (Col)

Third Stage

Mar 4-6:
Deportes Iquique (Chi)/Santa Fe (Col) v Nacional (Par)/Alianza Lima (Per)/Boca Juniors (Arg); The Strongest (Bol)/Bahia (Bra) v Boston River (Uru)/Nublense (Chi); Monagas (Ven)/Defensor Sporting (Uru)/Cerro Porteno (Par) v Tolima (Col)/Melgar (Per); Blooming (Bol)/El Nacional (Ecu)/Barcelona SC (Ecu) v Universidad Central (Ven)/Corinthians (Bra)

Mar 11-13:
Nacional (Par)/Alianza Lima (Per)/Boca Juniors (Arg) v Deportes Iquique (Chi)/Santa Fe (Col); Boston River (Uru)/Nublense (Chi) v The Strongest (Bol)/Bahia (Bra); Tolima (Col)/Melgar (Per) v Monagas (Ven)/Defensor Sporting (Uru)/Cerro Porteno (Par); Universidad Central (Ven)/Corinthians (Bra) v Blooming (Bol)/El Nacional (Ecu)/Barcelona SC (Ecu)
Four losers drop into Copa Sudamericana

Group Stage Qualifiers

Botafogo (Bra), River Plate (Arg), Palmeiras (Bra), Flamengo (Bra), Penarol (Uru), Nacional (Uru), Sao Paulo (Bra), Racing (Arg), Olimpia (Par), LDU Quito (Ecu), Internacional (Bra), Libertad (Par), Independiente del Valle (Ecu), Colo-Colo (Chi), Estudiantes (Arg), Bolivar (Bol), Atletico Nacional (Col), Velez Sarsfield (Arg), Fortaleza (Bra), Sporting Cristal (Per), Universitario (Per), Talleres (Arg), Deportivo Tachira (Ven), Universidad de Chile (Chi), Carabobo (Ven), Atletico Bucaramanga (Col), San Antonio Bulo Bulo (Bol), Central Cordoba (Arg)

2025 COPA SUDAMERICANA

Qualifying Draw

First Stage

Mar 4-6:
Universitario de Vinto (Bol) v Nacional Potosi (Bol); Universidad Catolica (Chi) v Palestino (Chi); ADT (Per) v Cienciano (Per); Academia Puerto Cabello (Ven) v Metropolitanos (Ven); Aurora (Bol) v GV San Jose (Bol); Union Espanola (Chi) v Everton (Chi); Once Caldas (Col) v Millonarios (Col); Mushuc Runa (Ecu) v Orense (Ecu); Sportivo Luqueno (Par) v Sportivo Ameliano (Par); Racing (Uru) v Montevideo Wanderers (Uru); Junior (Col) v America de Cali (Col); Universidad Catolica (Ecu) v Aucas (Ecu); Guarani (Par) v 2 de Mayo (Par); Atletico Grau (Per) v Cusco (Per); Cerro Largo (Uru) v Danubio (Uru); Deportivo La Guaira (Ven) v Caracas (Ven)

Group Stage Qualifiers

Atletico Mineiro (Bra), Fluminense (Bra), Gremio (Bra), Independiente (Arg), Cruzeiro (Bra), Lanus (Arg), Defensa y Justicia (Arg), Vasco da Gama (Bra), Huracan (Arg), Godoy Cruz (Arg), Union (Arg), Vitoria (Bra)

ASIA

2024-25 AFC CHALLENGE LEAGUE

Knockout Round Draw

Quarter-Finals – West Region

Mar 5:
Al Arabi (Kuw) v Al Seeb (Oma);
East Bengal (Ind) v Arkadag (Tkm)

Mar 12:
Al Seeb (Oma) v Al Arabi (Kuw);
Arkadag (Tkm) v East Bengal (Ind)

Quarter-Finals –East Region

Mar 6:
Preah Khan Reach Svay Rieng (Cam) v Shan United (Mya);
Tainan City (Tpe) v Madura United (Idn)

Mar 13:
Shan United (Mya) v Preah Khan Reach Svay Rieng (Cam);
Madura United (Idn) v Tainan City (Tpe)

CONCACAF

ARUBA

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
RCA*	9	7	2	0	32	10	23
Britannia*	9	7	2	0	27	5	23
Dakota*	9	6	2	1	32	9	20
La Fama*	9	5	1	3	23	10	16
Nacional*	9	4	1	4	21	11	13
Estrella*	9	4	1	4	20	16	13
River Plate	9	4	1	4	21	18	13
United**	9	1	1	7	12	31	4
Jong Aruba**	9	1	1	7	8	38	4
Unistars (R)	9	0	0	9	4	52	0

*Advance to Kaya 6 play-offs
**Enter relegation play-off

Internationals

2025 AFRICA CUP OF NATIONS

Group Stage Draw & Schedule

Group A
Morocco
Mali
Zambia
Comoros

Dec 21-22:
Morocco v Comoros; Mali v Zambia
Dec 26:
Morocco v Mali; Zambia v Comoros
Dec 29:
Zambia v Morocco; Comoros v Mali

Group B
Egypt
South Africa
Angola
Zimbabwe

Dec 22:
Egypt v Zimbabwe; South Africa v Angola
Dec 26:
Egypt v South Africa; Angola v Zimbabwe
Dec 29:
Angola v Egypt; Zimbabwe v South Africa

Group C
Nigeria
Tunisia
Uganda
Tanzania

Dec 23:
Nigeria v Tanzania; Tunisia v Uganda
Dec 27:
Nigeria v Tunisia; Uganda v Tanzania
Dec 30:
Uganda v Nigeria; Tanzania v Tunisia

Group D
Senegal
DR Congo
Benin
Botswana

Dec 23:
Senegal v Botswana; DR Congo v Benin
Dec 27:
Senegal v DR Congo; Benin v Botswana
Dec 30:
Benin v Senegal; Botswana v DR Congo

Group E
Algeria
Burkina Faso
Equatorial Guinea
Sudan

Dec 24:
Algeria v Sudan;
Burkina Faso v Equatorial Guinea
Dec 28:
Algeria v Burkina Faso;
Equatorial Guinea v Sudan
Dec 31:
Equatorial Guinea v Algeria;
Sudan v Burkina Faso

Group F
Ivory Coast
Cameroon
Gabon
Mozambique

Dec 24:
Ivory Coast v Mozambique; Cameroon v Gabon
Dec 28:
Ivory Coast v Cameroon; Gabon v Mozambique
Dec 31:
Gabon v Ivory Coast; Mozambique v Cameroon

The 2025 AFCON tournament takes place from December 21, 2025 to January 18, 2026.

2024 AFRICAN NATIONS CHAMPIONSHIP (CHAN)

Group Stage Draw

Group A
Kenya
Morocco
Angola
DR Congo
Zambia

Group B
Tanzania
Madagascar
Mauritania
Burkina Faso
Central African Republic

Group C
Uganda
Niger
Guinea
Qualifier 2
Qualifier 1

Group D
Senegal
Congo
Sudan
Nigeria

The CHAN 2024 competition will now take place in August 2025 after being postponed (it was originally scheduled for February 2025). Following the original qualification process and withdrawals of Libya and Tunisia, a new set of qualifiers will now take place to fill the final two spots in Group C. Algeria, Comoros, Egypt, Gabon, Gambia, Malawi and South Africa will take part in the repechage qualifiers although, at the time of writing, CAF is yet to announce the format and dates of those preliminaries.

FRIENDLIES

Results

Jan 4 – Gombani
Burkina Faso 1 (S. Traore 89)
Kenya 1 (Kinyanjui 45+3)

Jan 7 – Gombani
Tanzania 0
Kenya 2 (Muchiri 55, Ogam 68)

Jan 9 – Gombani
Tanzania 0
Burkina Faso 2 (Pitroipa 30, 40)

Jan 18 – Fort Lauderdale
United States 3 (McGlynn 37, Agyemang 39, Miljevic 64)
Venezuela 1 (Yriarte 68)

Jan 22 – Orlando
United States 3 (White 21, Clark 77, Agyemang 90)
Costa Rica 0

Jan 26 – Doha
Uzbekistan 0
Jordan 0

Fixtures

Mar 16:
Honduras v Guatemala
Mar 20:
Tajikistan v Belarus
Mar 22:
Luxembourg v Sweden
Mar 24:
Switzerland v Luxembourg; Azerbaijan v Belarus
Mar 25:
Sweden v Northern Ireland

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Cobi Jones

United States v Argentina

1995 Copa America, Estadio Parque Artigas

One year on from reaching the last 16 at the World Cup on home soil, the United States headed to Uruguay for the 1995 Copa America. Led by star winger Jones, the US made history – starting with a famous group-stage win against Argentina

United States legend...Jones won a record 164 caps for his country

"We'd played in the Copa America two years earlier and had drawn 3-3 with Venezuela in our last group game after leading 3-0. So the main lesson we took from that tournament was: don't give up leads.

That was a squad that had been brought together to find a way to get ready for the World Cup in '94. We were prepping. Those were like warm-up games to understand what a major tournament is like. But going into the 1995 Copa, having reached the last 16 of the World Cup a year earlier, there were expectations from the coaching staff and the US Soccer Federation.

For us it was a time of upheaval. We were getting a new coach – Steve Sampson took over – and we were in contract negotiations with our federation. There were a lot of things going on that could easily have taken away from our concentration on the matches. But everybody wanted to play for the national team and to perform at the Copa America.

There was a buoyancy after we beat Chile in the first game. There was a joy in how we were playing and coming together as a group. I think the fact that we were all in contract negotiations together might have helped. We realised we had to all rely on one another. That showed on the pitch.

In the final group game, we played an Argentina side that included Gabriel Batistuta, Roberto Ayala and Marcelo Gallardo. Ariel Ortega and Diego Simeone came on at half-time. They were one of the best teams in the world at that time. Going into that, we were like: "Okay, can we get anything out of this match? What do we have to lose?" No one expected anything from us. We had to just go out there and play to our strengths, which at that time was to battle and fight.

We were playing with a sweeper and Paul Caligiuri had the game of his life. I specifically remember two Argentinian strikers bearing down on him. He had the ball by himself in our 18-yard box.

He spun one way and then pulled the ball back through, and both strikers went flying by. He was giving everyone on the field a heart attack, but he was in the zone, he was so comfortable.

At half-time, we were leading 2-0. Everyone was so hyped to the point we were shaking. Things were going so well. We knew a 3-0 win would put us top of the group and we managed to do that.

Copa America...Jones against Bolivia in the group stage of the 1995 competition

I remember getting the assist for Alexi Lalas to score the second goal. The '94 World Cup had brought a bit of attention to me, and this game really solidified that. *"Cobi Yoh-ness"*, the Spanish pronunciation of my name, became almost like burn in Argentina. It was fantastic to play so well and to get recognition.

After we beat Mexico on penalties in the quarter-finals, we played Brazil in the semis. They'd beaten us 1-0 at the World Cup, but we weren't thinking about revenge; we just had to continue in the same vein as throughout the finals, stick together as a group and find a way to get a result. Unfortunately, it didn't work out. Aldair scored a header from a Roberto Carlos set-piece and we lost 1-0. But just getting that far in the Copa America was one of the great moments for US soccer.

> "Our run at the tournament is one of the greatest US soccer stories never told"

I signed for Vasco da Gama shortly after. They probably did their research on me from my performances in the Copa.

Our run at the tournament is one of the greatest US soccer stories never told. I don't think people realise how huge it was."

Interview by Ryan Baldi

pitch

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